

FAQs: What to Expect When You Start Psychotherapy

The decision to start psychotherapy can sometimes be anxiety provoking. You might be wondering what therapy will be like, how long it will last, how effective it will be, and what your role will be in the process. This handout will help you gain a better understanding of what to expect from your psychotherapy sessions.

Question: What kinds of therapies are out there?



Answer: There are several dozen types of psychotherapies. A common distinction between these different psychotherapies is based on the degree of research support they have.

- An *Evidence-Based Psychotherapy* (EBP) is a treatment program that has been shown to be effective through rigorous research. These treatments tend to be structured and effective and are usually the ones recommended by national agencies as the first-line treatment to try for disorders such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Another common type of psychotherapy is often referred to as *Supportive Counseling*. Supportive Counseling tends to be less structured than EBPs, but has also been shown to be effective for treatment.

You should discuss what type of therapy is right for you with your provider.

Question: How fast does therapy work?

Answer: As with most things, making progress in therapy takes some time, so do not expect instant results. Throughout treatment, you and your provider will track your symptoms to make sure they are improving. If your symptoms do not improve, then you and your provider can work together to modify the treatment to better meet your needs.

Question: How long does therapy take?

Answer: Most DoD clinics primarily offer brief therapy and have very limited ability to provide long-term therapy. Many EBPs can be delivered over the course of weeks or a few months, rather than spending years in treatment. However, the actual amount of time you will need is determined by many factors, including:

- Severity of disorder: The more severe the symptoms of your disorder are, the longer it may take to get better. This does not mean that you cannot get well if you have a more severe condition; it may just take more sessions than a milder condition.
- Number of problems: It is common for individuals to experience more than one behavioral health problem at a time. For example, the treatment of both depression and anxiety is likely to take longer than the treatment of depression alone. The good news is that many of the skills that you learn to effectively cope with one disorder will prove effective with other problems that may be present.



Question: Should I go to group therapy or individual therapy?

Answer: Both group and individual psychotherapy work well, and many times people will use both types of therapy as part of their treatment. Some clinics may primarily use group therapy for conditions like depression, anxiety disorders, and PTSD. As a result, you may be referred into a group as part of your treatment plan if you have one of these conditions.

Question: Do I need to do any homework?

Answer: Homework or “between session practice assignments” are used in many types of therapies, especially EBPs. Homework is a critical part of these treatments as it allows you the opportunity to apply the skills learned during session in your actual life experiences. You will work collaboratively with your therapist to determine your weekly homework assignments. Completing homework is tied to level of progress; research has shown that people who complete their practice assignments regularly have better treatment outcomes than those who do not.

Question: How long does the improvement last after stopping therapy?

Answer: As with other medical problems, treatment usually works, but it does not eliminate future emotional issues. For example, if you were diagnosed with diabetes, you would work with your medical doctor to take medications and make behavioral changes (e.g., healthy nutrition and increased exercise) to help regulate your glucose levels. Once your glucose levels were regulated, you would continue to monitor them over time. If your glucose levels were elevated, then you would go to your doctor for a check-up.

Behavioral health treatment is very similar. After receiving treatment for a behavioral health problem, such as depression, signs of improvement are decreased depressive symptoms and improved quality of life. At the end of treatment, you will work with your provider to learn how to monitor your mood and symptoms over time and to determine the next course of action.

What you can do to make improvements last:

- Have realistic expectations about everyday moods (the ups and downs will still be there)
- Monitor moods/symptoms for a return in the disorder
- Practice skills you learned to prevent the problem from returning
- Return to behavioral health treatment if symptoms worsen or interfere with your daily life

