



A Program of Wheeler Clinic

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# Traditional Therapies Used to Treat Mental Illnesses

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

## Why are traditional therapies used to treat mental illnesses?

Mental health professionals use a variety of approaches to give people tools to deal with ingrained, troublesome patterns of behavior and to help them manage symptoms of mental illness. The best therapists will work with you to design a treatment plan that will be most effective for you. This sometimes involves a single method, or it may involve elements of several different methods, often referred to as an "eclectic approach" to therapy.

### Behavioral Therapy

As the name implies, this approach focuses on behavior; changing unwanted behaviors through rewards, reinforcements, and desensitization. Desensitization, or Exposure Therapy, is a process of confronting something that arouses anxiety, discomfort, or fear and overcoming the unwanted responses. Behavioral therapy often involves the cooperation of others, especially family and close friends, to reinforce a desired behavior.

### Biomedical Treatment

Medication alone, or in combination with psychotherapy, has proven to be an effective treatment for a number of emotional, behavioral, and mental disorders. The kind of medication a psychiatrist prescribes varies with the disorder and the individual being treated.

### Cognitive Therapy

This method aims to identify and correct distorted thinking patterns that can lead to feelings and behaviors that may be troublesome, self-defeating, or even self-destructive. The goal is to replace such thinking with a more balanced view that, in turn, leads to more fulfilling and productive behavior.

### Cognitive/Behavioral Therapy

A combination of cognitive and behavioral therapies, this approach helps people change negative thought patterns, beliefs, and behaviors so they can manage symptoms and enjoy more productive, less stressful lives.

### Couples Counseling and Family Therapy

These two similar approaches to therapy involve discussions and problem-solving sessions facilitated by a therapist. The sessions may be with the couple, entire family group or individuals. Such therapy can help couples and family members improve their understanding of, and the way they respond to, one another. This type of therapy can resolve patterns of behavior that might lead to more severe mental illness. Family therapy can help educate individuals about the nature of mental disorders and teach them skills to cope better with the effects of having a family member with a mental illness, such as how to deal with feelings of anger or guilt.

### Electroconvulsive Therapy

Also known as ECT, this highly controversial technique uses low voltage electrical stimulation of the brain to treat some forms of major depression, acute mania, and some forms of schizophrenia. This potentially life-saving technique is considered only

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when other therapies have failed, when a person is seriously medically ill and/or unable to take medication, or when a person is very likely to commit suicide. Substantial improvements in the equipment, dosing guidelines, and anesthesia have significantly reduced the possibility of side effects.

### **Group Therapy**

This form of therapy involves groups of usually four to twelve people who have similar problems and who meet regularly with a therapist. The therapist uses the emotional interactions of the group's members to help them get relief from distress and possibly modify their behavior.

### **Interpersonal Psychotherapy**

Through one-on-one conversations, this approach focuses on the patient's current life and relationships within the family, social, and work environments. The goal is to identify and resolve problems with insight, as well as build on strengths.

### **Light Therapy**

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that appears related to fluctuations in the exposure to natural light. It usually strikes during autumn and often continues through the winter when natural light is reduced. Researchers have found that people who have SAD can be helped with the symptoms of their illness if they spend blocks of time bathed in light from a special full-spectrum light source, called a "light box."

### **Play Therapy**

Geared toward young children, this technique uses a variety of activities, such as painting, puppets, and dioramas, to establish communication with the therapist and resolve problems. Play allows the child to express emotions and problems that would be too difficult to discuss with another person.

### **Psychoanalysis**

This approach focuses on past conflicts as the underpinnings to current emotional and behavioral problems. In this long-term and intensive therapy,

an individual meets with a psychoanalyst three to five times a week, using "free association" to explore unconscious motivations and earlier, unproductive patterns of resolving issues.

### **Psychodynamic Psychotherapy**

Based on the principles of psychoanalysis, this therapy is less intense, tends to occur once or twice a week, and spans a shorter time. It is based on the premise that human behavior is determined by one's past experiences, genetic factors, and current situation. This approach recognizes the significant influence that emotions and unconscious motivation can have on human behavior.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

National Mental Health Information Center

[www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/ken98-0053/default.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/ken98-0053/default.asp)