A woman with dark curly hair and glasses, wearing an orange long-sleeved shirt and black pants, sits in a wooden chair with a striped cushion. She is looking towards a therapist whose arm and hand are visible in the foreground. The therapist is wearing a light-colored sweater. They are in a room with white bookshelves filled with books. A potted plant is on the left, and a small table with a lit candle and a glass of water is between them. A modern lamp hangs from the ceiling.

In talk therapy, the goal is to establish a safe space where patients can feel free to discuss their innermost thoughts.





# Talk Therapy to Me

MODERN PSYCHOTHERAPY HAS PROVEN TO BE ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO HELP TREAT A WIDE VARIETY OF CONCERNS, FROM ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION TO ADDICTION AND OTHER DISORDERS.

» BY MELISSA STANGER, LMSW

**I**t's simple, really: When there's something wrong with your heart, you see a cardiologist; when you have a rash, you go to the dermatologist. But many people are still hesitant to seek out a therapist when something doesn't feel right in their minds.

Psychotherapy has been proven to not only ease the symptoms of many mental health conditions, but it can change the way we are able to think about and process our lives. From everyday anxieties to depression to substance abuse and eating disorders, there is very little that psychotherapy can't treat, and it's been doing so for more than a century.

## ● A Brief History of Psychotherapy

When most people today think of psychotherapy, they picture lying down on a couch and having their dreams interpreted. Or maybe they

think of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis. (Psychoanalysis, it should be noted, is the "classic" form of psychotherapy, taking place multiple times a week over a number of years, whereas psychodynamic psychotherapy is psychoanalytic in nature but is usually shorter and less frequent. It's also much more commonly sought out.) But actually, humans have been practicing psychotherapy in some form or another since long before our modern sense of what therapy is all about. At the dawn of Greek civilization, the philosopher Hippocrates theorized that mental illness stemmed from the brain, and that treating mental health conditions should be approached in a similar manner as treating physical health conditions, according to *The Journal of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine*.

More-religious conceptualizations of mental illness in later centuries

***Research reveals that participants in therapy show structural changes in the brain, compared to those only on medications.***

blamed “poor morals” for episodes of psychosis and depression—but the field of psychotherapy has come a long way since then. As he built the foundations of psychoanalysis, Freud based his work on helping his patients bring the unconscious (or the thoughts, feelings and memories that get repressed) into consciousness in order to free them from their internal conflicts. Some of Freud’s theories have since been revised or replaced, but this basic idea—that talking about our problems can help us understand the ways in which we think and behave—still remains the cornerstone of modern psychotherapy.

● **The Evolution of Talk Therapy**

If Freud were still alive today, he might not even recognize the way that the field has changed. “Psychoanalysis, as a theory and as a practice, has evolved substantially over the past hundred years,” says



**\$65–\$250**

Average rate  
of a private therapy  
session, depending  
on location

Perrin Elisha, PhD, a licensed psychologist and psychoanalyst.

Back in Freud’s day, the therapist was meant to be a blank slate, a mirror who reflected back on the patient. Today, psychoanalysts use their own relationships with their patients almost as a microcosm of what’s going on in the patients’ lives. For example, if a therapist feels a patient becoming very hostile around the subject of money, the therapist may also inquire as to the role that money

played in the patient’s childhood.

“The psychoanalysis of today is relatable,” Elisha says. “It’s a very active, engaged, real relationship, and I think that’s the beauty of it.”

Psychotherapy “is very helpful in developing a relationship and speaking about one’s experiences, both of outside events and of how the client and therapist feel toward each other,” says Arlene B. Englander, LCSW, a licensed clinical social worker and psychotherapist and





Group therapy sessions bring together people with similar concerns.

## THE RISE OF VIRTUAL THERAPY

When towns and cities across the country shut down for social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, so too did most therapists' offices. Luckily, many practitioners quickly pivoted to virtual treatments, allowing their patients to conduct their sessions either online or through their phones.

That may have opened the doors to all sorts of virtual-therapy options. Online services have skyrocketed in popularity—the therapy app Talkspace reports a 250 percent increase in live video sessions since March 2019—and are drawing clients both for their accessibility and affordability (many are much less expensive than in-person visits).

But logging onto a website and seeking treatments can look and feel a little unnerving. Here, a few guidelines to follow to help you get the most out of your experience.

**Establish a Connection** And we're not just talking your Wi-Fi. "The most important part of therapy is the relationship you have with your therapist," says Rachel O'Neill, PhD, director of clinical effectiveness for Talkspace. "It's important to find someone you feel connected to, someone who you feel comfortable sharing with, and someone you feel really understands you." If you can't do that, ask to switch to someone else associated with the practice.

**Keep It Consistent** Set up a regular schedule like you would with in-person appointments. The good thing is that there are a lot fewer roadblocks when you just have to log on. "Compliance is so important with therapy—and with telehealth, it's much easier to show up," says psychiatrist Nina Vasan, MD, founder of Brainstorm: The Stanford Lab for Mental Health Innovation.

**Create a Safe Space** Although it's a win for convenience, one challenge of tele-mental health is that you're talking about your problems at home. If you live with someone, there's a potential for them—or neighbors in apartments—to overhear your private conversations. Some people may have concerns about privacy, or they may feel invaded upon when you're viewing them on a camera in their home, says psychiatrist Margaret Seide, MS, MD. Find an area that you feel free to talk and freely express your feelings.

**Look Around** There are several options available to patients, and more are likely to come soon, as telemedicine in general gains in popularity. Both Talkspace and BetterHelp offer around-the-clock options as well as texting and chat services. The website 7Cups has free live help from volunteers 24/7. And the service MDLive also provides access to a psychiatrist if you need prescriptions for treatment.

—Diana Kelly Levey

the author of *Let Go of Emotional Overeating and Love Your Food*. "This is the building block of any change that will eventually take place."

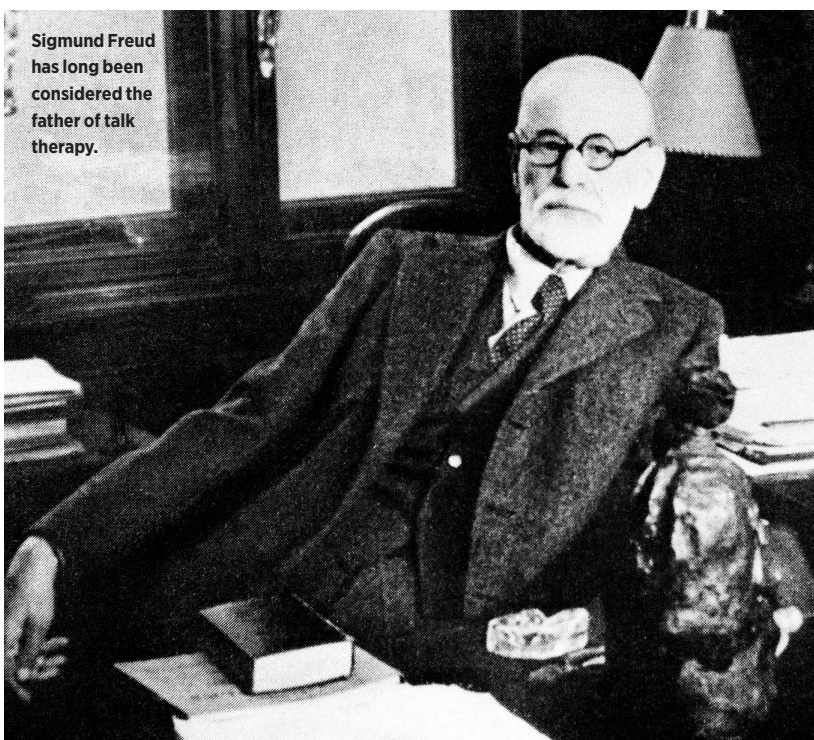
### ● To CBT or Not to CBT?

Many people who decide to give therapy a try may begin with cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, because of the way it's been proven to treat certain issues, especially anxiety and phobias. CBT treatment is often much shorter in

duration—often no more than 12 to 15 weeks—and uses a variety of cognitive restructuring techniques, like challenging distorted thoughts, exposure therapy and meditative-like relaxation exercises with the goal of changing the way you think in order to modify the way you behave. (For more on CBT, see page 72.)

There is one caveat, however. "CBT is more on the surface, dealing with how thoughts can affect feelings or affect behaviors,"

says Sharone Weltfried, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist in San Francisco. "Psychodynamic theory takes it a step further by going into the source of our feelings and beliefs that cause them in the first place, and get to the source of our beliefs." It places a large emphasis on early life experiences that may have influenced the way we developed as people, and part of this happens by talking about how you feel about your therapist, and vice versa.



Sigmund Freud has long been considered the father of talk therapy.

“Psychodynamic therapy focuses on the relationship between the client and the therapist,” she explains. For example, if a client has a fear of judgment from others, Weltfried might discuss early relationships in the client’s life where they felt judged and how they may be perceiving their relationship with Weltfried herself and whether they feel she is judging them, too. “Then I can share with them whether that might be the case,” Weltfried says. “The therapeutic relationship can make the client realize that other types of relationships are possible.”

### ● Friendly Flexibility

Another way that psychodynamic psychotherapy or psychoanalysis works differently from CBT is that it’s less fixed. “Working relationally in a psychodynamic way is probably one of the most creative, improvisational arts there is,” says Michael Alcee, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist. “It’s a lot like jazz, it’s a lot like poetry; you’re

*The length of treatment can vary, but the amount of time a patient spends in psychoanalysis can average five to six years.*

constantly trying to see what form emerges and how you and the patient can find new forms together.”

Psychotherapy is somewhat like having a friendly guide to take you through your psyche. And while psychotherapy is hard work, Alcee adds that doesn’t mean it’s tedious. “I think that one of the things that people are most refreshed by is how

playful and fun it is,” he says. “My office is in my house, and my wife sometimes jokes, ‘I hear you laughing up there quite a lot—are you really working?’” He is, he says, but the work isn’t always solemn or serious. “What’s actually most wonderful about it is it’s a combination of analyzing and distilling, and then synthesizing,” he says, and this can be done with humor and lightness.

Many psychodynamic psychotherapists incorporate elements of CBT and other modalities into their practice because—as is often the case—one therapeutic technique doesn’t fit everyone. “I’m not against CBT,” says Elisha. “The help that we get should be as efficient and cost-effective over the long term as possible. But the thing is that I see a lot of people who spent a lot of time and energy in CBT therapy, because there are still parts that aren’t being addressed.” The benefit of adding psychoanalytic styles is being able to take the work further. “It gives added depth to other techniques we utilize, such as CBT,” adds Englander.

### ● Is It Right for You?

“The cultural image of the analyst is someone who is there to critique you or judge you or break you down,” Alcee says, but that’s not the case at all. A good psychotherapist will not push you further than you’re ready to go, and they don’t go into each session looking for a breakthrough. What they will do is explore with you the significant events and relationships in your life that made you who you are.

Elisha says it’s important to normalize for her patients that seeking out psychotherapy doesn’t mean that they’re weak or “crazy”—they’re just human. “Because so much of our minds are unconscious, there are things about all of this that we don’t know,” she says, “and that doesn’t make anyone broken or sick; it’s just part of our condition.” ●

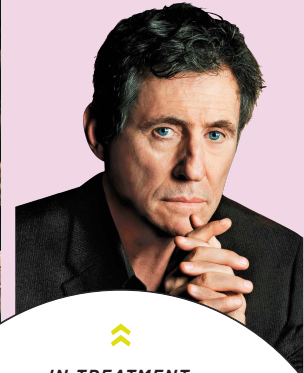


## ANALYZE THIS

Psychotherapy is nothing like what we see in pop culture, but therapists have been portrayed on TV and in movies—accurately or not—many times over for our entertainment. Here, a few of our favorites:

### >> ANALYZE THIS, ANALYZE THAT

Billy Crystal plays the reluctant analyst to a mafioso client (Robert De Niro) in the 1999 comedy *Analyze This* and its sequel, *Analyze That*. While wildly entertaining and laugh-out-loud funny, Crystal's involvement with his client goes far beyond the scope of any believable therapist.



### >> IN TREATMENT

Gabriel Byrne provides insight as a therapist in session with a different patient in every episode—and sometimes in session with his own therapist—on the HBO drama. As far as accuracy goes, Byrne's depiction is a fairly real, albeit highly dramatized, look at what goes on when a patient hits the couch.

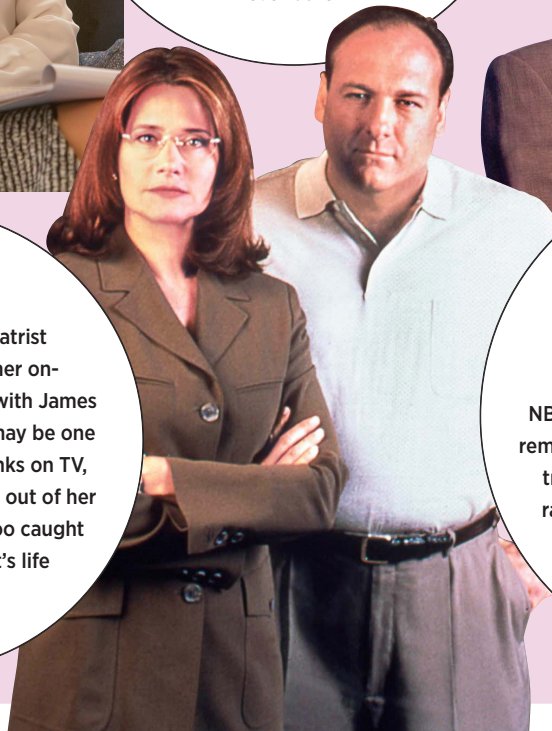
### << GYPSY

Naomi Watts plays a psychotherapist who crosses into some very dangerous territory after hours in the Netflix show. Many therapists may wonder what their clients' lives are really like apart from what they tell them in session, but inserting themselves into their lives? No ethically bound psychotherapist would ever dare.



### >> THE SOPRANOS

Lorraine Bracco's psychiatrist character Dr. Melfi—and her on-again/off-again relationship with James Gandolfini's Tony Soprano—may be one of the most well-known shrinks on TV, but more than once she steps out of her professional role and gets too caught up in her gangster client's life on the HBO hit.



### >> FRASIER

David Hyde Pierce and Kelsey Grammer play the wacky therapist brothers and professional rivals Niles and Frasier Crane on the NBC show. For a sitcom, the portrayals are remarkably accurate, particularly Grammer's transition from the therapy room to the radio broadcasting studio, showing that therapists are more than just the counselor sitting across from you.

