



Mental Health Minute

To increase public awareness about mental health issues, the Mental Health Association is running a series of 8 articles on mental illness.

Traditional Therapies

When things seem to be spinning out of control or you find yourself dealing with problems over and over again with the same old unproductive results, therapy can help you "jump start" your life and turn it around in positive ways.

Mental health professionals use a variety of approaches to give people new 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 determine a treatment plan that will be most effective for you. This sometimes involves a single method or it may involve elements of several different ones, often referred to as an "eclectic approach" to therapy.

Keep in mind that new research can yield rapid and dramatic changes in our understanding of, and approaches to, mental disorders.

The following is a brief description of the methods mental health professionals most commonly use:

Behavioral Therapy: As the name implies, this approach focuses on behavior-changing unwanted behaviors through rewards, reinforcements, and desensitization. Desensitization is a process of confronting something that arouses anxiety, discomfort, or fear and overcoming the unwanted responses. Someone whose fear of germs leads to excessive washing, for example, may be trained to relax and not wash his or her hands after touching a public doorknob. 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. For example, some people who suffer from anxiety, bipolar disorder, major depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorders, and schizophrenia find their symptoms improve dramatically through careful monitoring of appropriate medication.

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. Consider the person who will not apply for a promotion on the assumption that it is beyond reach, for example. With cognitive therapy, the next time a promotion comes up that person might still initially think, "I won't get that position..." but then immediately add, "unless I show my boss what a good job I would do."

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-sometimes with the couple or entire family group, sometimes with 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 may be very useful with children and adolescents who are experiencing problems.

Coping with serious mental illness is hard on marriages and families. Family therapy can help educate the individuals about the nature of the disorder 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. In addition, family therapy can help members identify and reduce factors that may trigger or worsen the disorder.

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 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 4 to 12 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.

Mental Health Minute is provided by the Mental Health Association of Franklin & Fulton Counties (MHA) through funding from the Franklin/Fulton Mental Health/ Mental Retardation/ Drug and Alcohol Program. For more info: call 1-866-593-8351 or email: info@mhaff.org.