



Let's Talk: Older Adults & Therapy

Therapy 101

Therapy (also called psychotherapy or talk therapy) is a mental health treatment where you talk with a mental health care provider about challenges impacting your well-being. Therapy is usually recommended before medications for most mental health concerns.

Depending on the issue you would like to address, therapy can be as short as one session or may require multiple sessions.

Therapy can help you learn strategies to feel better, face your fears and express your feelings, emotions and needs. It can be a helpful treatment for a variety of challenges, including:



physical health challenges



excessive worry or stress



grief and loss



life transitions



relationships



feeling sad or hopeless



examining your childhood or past



changing a habit or behaviour





Therapy is a mental health treatment

Therapy is different than talking with a friend or family member about your challenges. A professional mental health care provider is trained to see your situation without judgment and offer approaches to help resolve your challenges. They can help you in a way that the people closest to you might not be able to.



Types of therapy

You may have heard of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which is often recommended for older adults. CBT is one of the 100s of types of therapies available. (Read [Psychology Today's "Types of Therapy" resource](#) to learn more.) Some types of therapy will help you with an immediate issue, while others will focus more on your past.

You do not have to know what type of therapy you need. However, to narrow down what might work best for you, you can think about what is important to you:

- Do you want to address a pressing challenge, like sleep issues or a life transition?
- Do you want to address an issue from your past that is impacting your well-being?
- Would you like to learn specific strategies and skills to help with your problem (e.g., goal-setting or problem-solving)?

A mental health care provider will have specialized training in one or more different types of therapy. You can ask them what type of therapy might work best for you.





Meeting with a mental health care provider

Therapy is much more widely available than it used to be. When you decide to start therapy, you will schedule an appointment with a mental health care provider.

Therapy appointments can take place in-person, online (video call or text-based) or over the phone. Appointments can be as short as 20 minutes or last over an hour. There are different formats for therapy, including:

Group



Usually, 8-12 people who do not know each other but who are going through similar challenges. A mental health care provider will facilitate the group.

Couples or family



You and your partner, friend or family member(s) meet with a mental health care provider and address issues together.

Individual



Meeting one-on-one with a mental health care provider.

The therapy format you choose will depend on factors like:

Cost

Group programs are often more cost-effective ways to access therapy.

Preference

- Is it important for you to be in a group?
- Do you prefer to speak with a mental health care provider privately?





Types of mental health providers

Just as there are a variety of professionals who help you with your physical health—such as doctors, physical therapists or dentists—there are also different mental health care providers. Mental health care providers work in a variety of settings, including hospitals and clinics; community programs; rehabilitation centres; care facilities; crisis support programs; and private practice.

Mental health care providers include:

- Psychiatrists
- Psychologists
- Social workers
- Mental health nurses
- Counsellors, including family and marriage counsellors
- Religious counsellors
- Other health providers, like occupational therapists, may have the credentials to provide therapy.



Each type of provider has different training and a unique scope of practice. Depending on their credentials, they may be able to:

- Prescribe medication.
- Provide therapy.
- Diagnose mental health conditions.
- Connect you to community supports and services.
- Refer you to other health care providers.

Many of these professionals are licensed, which means they are registered with a professional regulatory body (e.g., association or college). Provinces and territories are responsible for rules about licensing. It's important to look up this information based on where you live. It is important to work with a mental health care provider who has a current license and/or relevant training to help you.





How to find a mental health care provider

Some ways to find a mental health care provider include:

- Asking for a referral or recommendation from a trusted health provider.
- Asking a friend, family member or faith leader for suggestions.
- Going to a local community health centre or community hub.
- Searching online for therapists licensed in your province or territory.
- Consulting the [Affordable Therapy Network](#).
- Using [Psychology Today's "Find a Therapist" tool](#) to find a private therapist.
- Searching with the [Canadian Certified Counsellor search engine](#).

How to access therapy

Therapy is sometimes covered by provincial/territorial health plans or health insurance. Some private practice therapists or clinics will offer a sliding scale rate, which means that the fee they charge is based on your income. There are also low-cost or free services available.

Although therapy is proven to be effective in treating many mental health issues in older adults, there can be barriers to accessing support such as mobility challenges, cost, long waitlists or lack of services in some areas.

Some types of therapy, like CBT, are more common and accessible than others. You can learn more about CBT by reading [CCSMH's Let's Talk: Older Adults & CBT resource](#).

If you have a challenge that you would like support with but cannot easily access therapy or want to try other strategies first, you could:

- Learn about [mental wellness resources for older adults](#).
- Join an in-person or online support group.
- Read books or use apps that are focused on mental health.





The therapeutic relationship

A key to success in therapy is having a supportive relationship with a mental health care provider you trust and feel comfortable with. Therapy can sometimes feel vulnerable or uncomfortable. You are more likely to make progress in therapy when you feel at ease and can be yourself.



It may feel important to work with a mental health care provider who:

- Shows an understanding of your life experiences.
- Specializes in the issues you want to address (e.g., grief).
- Has similar identities as you (e.g., age, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, language).
- Has availability to take on new clients.
- Charges rates that fit within your budget and/or health insurance.

Some providers offer a free consultation so you can both assess if you are a good fit to work together. It is okay to try more than one professional before deciding who you want to work with.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to therapy. What is important is learning about the different options available to you and finding something that works best for you.

Additional Resources

- Find information on free and virtual mental health services in your province or territory on the [Get Help Here: Mental Health Support](#) resource page.
- Find low-cost and free resources and services through your local chapter of the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#).

If you need urgent help now:

- **Call 9-1-1** if you or someone you know is in immediate danger.
- **Call or text 9-8-8** if you or someone you know is thinking about suicide.

