

Understanding Different Types of Therapy 101

Starting therapy for the first time can be intimidating or scary for many reasons. You're meeting a new person, becoming vulnerable, and speaking out loud about things you maybe never have before. As natural as having fears and hesitations about first-time therapy are, not understanding the type of therapy you'll be getting should not be one of them.

One of the key ideas in many different theories within the mental health field is the concept of "demystifying therapy". This means bringing the client into what their therapy work might entail, why it works, and allowing for questions and feedback. Although there are many, many different modalities for therapy, today we'll just start with demystifying some of the most common modalities you might experience in your sessions..

ACT: Short for Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. ACT at its core is based on figuring out what your values are and making choices/actions that align with them. Part of getting to know your most core/authentic values includes learning tools to accept the discomfort that might come with maintaining them or experiencing malalignment with them.

CBT: Short for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. CBT believes that your thoughts affect your feelings which affect your actions. Logic then follows that the best way to change your feelings and actions is to first change your thoughts. CBT helps you to label your negative thoughts and learn to challenge them as they come up.

DBT: Short for Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. DBT acknowledges the nuance in the world by highlighting that two opposing truths can exist at the same time (for example: "I love my dog" and "my dog stresses me out"). DBT helps us to remember that one idea does not have to invalidate another even if it's complicated to hold space for both. DBT also includes learning skills for practically holding two truths at once.

IFS: Short for Internal Family Systems. IFS is the school of thought that inspired the Disney movie Inside Out! The main idea behind IFS is that we all have many parts within us (desires, fears, motivations), some of which we naturally like and some of which we might feel hesitant towards. How can we acknowledge and care for each of them, even the ones that cause discomfort?

Psychodynamic: Freud anyone? Psychodynamic theory is the oldest modality in therapy and is not often done independently today. The basic idea of psychodynamic therapy is that unconscious thoughts, feelings, memories, etc. from the past can affect your life in the present. Incorporating this theory means making the unconscious memories, thoughts, etc. conscious which takes away their power and allows you to respond accordingly.

EMDR/Brainspotting: EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. Although EMDR and brainspotting are different we'll include them into one category for now for simplicity. Both EMDR and brainspotting work to address trauma from a body-first perspective.

Specifically, both have the goal of processing trauma that's stuck in our bodies using our eyes as an entry point to the brain. (See our post from April 14th, 2025 for more information).

Narrative: Narrative therapy operates from the main idea that the stories we tell ourselves about our lives affect the way we feel, act, and interact with the world. Oftentimes our stories can be limiting and by using narrative therapy we can rewrite those stories in a way that builds confidence, power, and promotes healing.

Solutions Focused Therapy: The creators of Solutions Focused Therapy wanted to find a way to help people achieve their goals as quickly as possible. This theory works by removing focus from the problem and focusing on identifying and implementing solutions. Practically, this means figuring out what works and then replicating and increasing in order to solve more problems in your life.

Attachment Based: Attachment theory states that early experiences with our caregivers set the basis for our relationship with ourselves and others throughout the lifespan. By using attachment theory in therapy, we can learn to identify, label, and understand our patterns in relationships and heal/adapt from unhealthy patterns in our current/future relationships.

You might be reading through this list and noticing some similarities between one of the theories and the work you do with your therapist. Or maybe similarities with multiple of the theories. One of the great things about the therapy relationship is that as your therapist gets to know you better and begins to learn what works best for you and your growth, they can incorporate pieces of many theories into your treatment.

Whether you decide to advocate for yourself to try a new therapy type or just take this information as it is, the important thing is that you have the knowledge and feel empowered to understand, and ask questions about the type of therapy you're getting. Not only does demystifying therapy help build the therapist-client relationship to be even stronger, but it also can make reaching your goals easier, quicker, and more accessible.