

# Mental Health Therapy: What Should I Expect?

## Why this guide was made

Starting something new can be hard. This is true whether you are trying a new hobby, starting an exercise routine, or beginning therapy. It is normal to feel nervous, unsure, or overwhelmed when you do not know what to expect. This guide is here to help. It answers common questions about mental health therapy so you can feel more prepared, comfortable, and informed as you begin services.

Therapy is a place to talk with a trained person about your feelings, thoughts, choices, relationships, and life stress. The goal is to help you feel safer, stronger, and more supported.

## How do I get started?

Your first visit is often called an intake or assessment. This visit may last about 1 hour. The therapist will ask questions to better understand you and what you need.

Some questions may feel personal. The therapist is not asking to be nosy. Your answers help guide your care. You can also say, "I am not ready to answer that yet."

- Your mental and physical health history
- Your home, work, school, or family life
- Any legal concerns, if they apply
- Your safety, including thoughts of suicide or harm to others
- Your goals for therapy
- Your rights, privacy, and consent
- A crisis or safety plan, if one is needed

## How often will I see my therapist?

How often you go depends on your needs, goals, type of service, schedule, and insurance. Many people start with weekly visits. Later, visits may happen every other week or once a month as things improve.

You and your therapist should talk about what works best for you.

## Where can therapy happen?

Therapy may happen in different places. You and your therapist can talk about the best option for you.

- In person at an office or clinic
- By telehealth, such as video or phone
- In a group with other people who have similar needs

## What is expected of me?

Therapy works best when you take part in the process. You do not have to be perfect. You just need to try.

You can help by:

- Attending your sessions regularly and on time.
- Being as honest as you feel able to be.
- Asking questions when something does not make sense.
- Telling your therapist when something is not helping.
- Speaking up if you need a different plan.
- Following the clinic's rules about canceling or missing appointments.

Therapy is a team effort. Your therapist is there to support you, but your voice matters too. Consistent attendance can help you make more progress toward your goals.

## What should I expect from my therapist?

Your therapist should treat you with respect. You should feel heard, supported, and safe.

- Explain what therapy may look like
- Help you set goals
- Teach skills and helpful information
- Keep your information private, except when the law says they must share it for safety or legal reasons
- Work with you, not just tell you what to do
- Use healthy professional boundaries
- Treat you with dignity and respect

## What does good therapy look like?

Good therapy is based on your needs. There is no one right way for everyone. Your therapist should listen to your story, your culture, your strengths, and your goals.

Therapy can help you learn skills, understand yourself, manage stress, heal from hard experiences, and make healthy choices. Change can take time. Some weeks may feel easier than others. Setbacks can happen, and they do not mean you failed.

## What questions can I ask when choosing a therapist?

It is okay to ask questions before or during therapy. You may want to write your questions down.

- What kind of license or training do you have?
- Have you worked with concerns like mine before?
- What type of therapy do you use?
- How will we set goals?
- How will we know if therapy is helping?
- What should I do if I feel worse or have a crisis?
- What does privacy mean for me or my child?

- What will my insurance or payment cover?

## What are some do's and don'ts of therapy?

### Do

- Be honest when you can.
- Ask questions.
- Give feedback about what is helping or not helping.
- Tell your therapist if you feel unsafe, confused, or judged.
- Practice skills between sessions when you are able.

### Don't

- Do not feel pushed to share more than you are ready to share.
- Do not expect therapy to fix everything right away.
- Do not expect therapy to always feel easy.
- Do not stay silent if something feels wrong.

Therapy can bring up strong feelings. But therapy should not feel threatening, unsafe, or harmful.

## What are some things a therapist cannot do?

- Most therapists cannot prescribe medicine. A psychiatrist, nurse practitioner, or other medical provider may help with medicine.
- Therapists are usually not available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Therapists cannot replace emergency or crisis services.
- Therapists cannot have personal, dating, or social relationships with clients.
- Therapists cannot promise to keep secrets if there is a serious safety concern or certain legal duties to report.

These rules help protect you and keep therapy safe. If you are unsure what your therapist can or cannot do, ask them.

## What should I expect if my child gets therapy?

Parents and caregivers are important. At the first visit, the therapist will usually ask about your child's health, school, behavior, family, and any concerns you have.

The therapist will try to include parents while also giving the child or teen some privacy. This privacy helps the child build trust and talk more openly.

You may get general updates, ideas for helping at home, and information about goals. You may not hear every detail your child shares unless there is a safety concern.

The amount of information shared may depend on the child's age, needs, safety, and the law.

### A note about Tennessee law

In Tennessee, a teen age 16 or older may have some rights to consent to mental health treatment. Ask the therapist to explain privacy, consent, and parent involvement for your child. Laws can change, and this guide is not legal advice.

## How do I know where I can use my insurance?

Insurance plans are different. You can call the phone number on your insurance card and ask what mental health services are covered.

- Which therapists or clinics are in-network?
- Do I need a referral or approval first?
- What will my copay or cost be?
- Are telehealth, group therapy, or IOP covered?
- How many visits are covered?

If you do not have insurance, ask about self-pay, sliding-scale fees, grants, or community resources.

## Is it a good idea to use AI for therapy?

AI can help with some things, like learning words, making a list of questions, or practicing a coping skill. But AI should not replace a licensed therapist.

AI cannot fully know your story. It cannot safely diagnose you, assess danger, make a full treatment plan, or respond to a crisis the way a trained professional can.

Therapy is also about connection. A therapist listens, asks questions, notices patterns, builds trust with you, and helps you feel supported over time. Therapy is a relationship-based service, and AI cannot replace the safety, care, and human connection that happens between a client and a trained therapist.

Some people may feel more confused, scared, or upset after using AI for emotional support. If that happens, stop using it and talk to a trusted person or a mental health professional.

If you are in crisis, call or text 988, text HOME to 741741, or call 911 if there is immediate danger.

## Types of Therapy

Type	What it means
<b>Individual therapy</b>	You meet one-on-one with a therapist to work on your own goals.
<b>Family therapy</b>	Two or more family members meet with a therapist to improve communication, solve problems, and build healthier relationships.
<b>Inpatient and residential therapy</b>	You stay at a hospital or treatment center for close support and safety. This is usually short-term.
<b>Intensive outpatient program (IOP)</b>	You attend therapy several hours a day, several days a week, but you still live at home. This often happens in a group.
<b>Couples therapy</b>	Two partners meet with a therapist to work on communication, conflict, trust, or connection.
<b>Group therapy</b>	A small group meets with one or more therapists. Group members learn skills and support each other.

## Common Therapy Approaches

Therapists use different tools. Your therapist should explain what they recommend and why. You can ask questions or ask about other options. Here are a few therapy approaches:

**CBT: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:** Helps you notice unhelpful thoughts and actions, then practice more helpful ones.

**TF-CBT: Trauma-Focused CBT:** Helps children and teens heal after trauma with coping skills and caregiver support.

**CPT: Cognitive Processing Therapy:** Helps people work through trauma by looking at thoughts that keep them stuck.

**DBT: Dialectical Behavior Therapy:** Teaches skills for big feelings, stress, relationships, and mindfulness.

**ACT: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy:** Helps you handle hard thoughts and feelings while taking steps that match your values.

**EMDR: Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing:** Uses eye movements, tapping, or sounds while you think about a hard memory. The goal is for the memory to feel less painful over time.

**PCIT: Parent-Child Interaction Therapy:** Helps young children and caregivers build a stronger relationship and improve behavior.

**CPP: Child-Parent Psychotherapy:** Helps young children and caregivers heal after scary, stressful, or hard experiences. It focuses on the relationship between the child and caregiver and helps them feel safer, more connected, and better able to understand big feelings and behaviors.

## Types of Mental Health Professionals

You may see letters after a therapist's name. These letters often show the person's degree, license, or training. Rules can be different by state.

Credentials/Title	What it usually means
LCSW	Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Can provide therapy on their own and may supervise other social workers.
LMSW	Licensed Master Social Worker. Can provide therapy while supervised by a licensed clinician.
MSW or MSSW	A person with a master's degree in social work. They may be working toward a license and may provide services under supervision.
LPC-MHSP	Licensed Professional Counselor with a mental health service provider designation. Can provide mental health therapy.
LMFT	Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. Helps individuals, couples, and families, often with a focus on relationships.
PhD or PsyD	A doctoral-level psychologist. May provide therapy and testing, depending on their license and training.
Psychiatrist, APRN, or nurse practitioner	Medical providers who may diagnose and prescribe medicine, depending on their license.

## Do You Feel Like You Are in a Crisis?

A crisis is when you feel so upset or unsafe that you need help right away. You may feel panic, hopelessness, out of control, or unable to think clearly. A crisis can also mean that someone may hurt themselves or someone else.

Use these supports when safety is a concern:

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741.
- Emergency Services: Call 911 if there is immediate danger.
- East Tennessee Behavioral Health: (888) 610-7381.
- EmPATH: (865) 213-1550.

## Glossary: Helpful Words to Know

Word	Simple meaning
<b>Confidentiality</b>	Your therapist keeps your information private. There are times they may have to share information, such as serious safety concerns or legal reporting duties.
<b>Informed consent</b>	Your therapist explains services, risks, benefits, choices, and your rights before you agree to start.
<b>Suicide risk assessment</b>	Questions that help your therapist understand if you may hurt yourself and what support you need.
<b>Crisis plan or safety plan</b>	A plan that lists warning signs, coping skills, safe people to call, and emergency supports.
<b>No-harm contract</b>	A promise someone may make to seek help before hurting themselves. This does not replace a safety plan.
<b>Power of attorney</b>	A legal paper that lets a trusted person make certain decisions for you if you cannot make them yourself.
<b>Conservatorship</b>	A court process where a judge chooses someone to make decisions for a person who cannot safely manage certain parts of life.