

# What is Family Therapy?





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Family and systemic psychotherapy – also known as family therapy – can help those in close relationships to better understand and support each other. It enables family members to express and explore difficult thoughts and emotions safely, understand each other's experiences and views, appreciate each other's needs, build on family strengths, and work together to make useful changes in their relationships and their lives.

Every family is a bit like a human body. Sometimes it feels great, and things work well. Sometimes even small things can feel like a huge challenge. When we hurt one part of our body, every part can be affected in some way. But all the parts of the body can work together to help if a bone gets broken, or if there's an infection. So family therapy helps family members to work together when something is hurting, or just feeling out of sorts.



## Family life isn't always easy...

Families can be very complicated because everyone is unique. Each person thinks and talks about things in a different way, and each person has different ideas, feelings, worries and strengths. All kinds of changes can make family life more stressful, such as an illness, unemployment, moving home, new family members, getting older, divorce, death and trauma. Some families find their own ways to manage these changes, and some families find it much harder, for all kinds of reasons.

Family therapy can help families when they're feeling overwhelmed, sad and angry; when they're not sure what to do for the best; or when they feel stuck in repeating patterns of hurtful or harmful behaviour.



## What does 'family' mean?



Family therapists understand that different people have different ideas about what 'family' means. So 'family' is used to describe any group of people who care about each other and call themselves a family. As well as parents and children of all ages, they may also involve grandparents, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, cousins, friends, carers, and other professionals. They try to include whoever is important to the family.

Family therapists respect the importance of each person's beliefs, culture, and life experiences. They will adapt their approach and activities to suit the ages, needs, and preferences of each family they see.



## How might family therapy help me and my family?

Family therapy helps family members and friends to understand and support each other. Family therapists try to help everyone to feel safe so they can talk about their difficult thoughts and feelings, understand each other's experiences and views, appreciate each other's needs, build on family strengths, and work together to make useful changes in their relationships and their lives.



Some family therapists work in teams, because it's useful to share lots of ideas for families to think about together. Others work on their own. But they will all help families and individuals to talk about their hopes, and to work towards their own goals as a family. Sometimes it only takes a few sessions to help a family find their way. Sometimes difficulties are more complicated, and families may need longer to find the solutions that work best for them.

## What do family therapists do?



Here are some of the things that a family therapist might do with a family:

- Talk about each person's hopes for their family.
- Encourage everyone in the family to talk about their experiences, and to listen to everyone else.
- Respect and clarify each person's beliefs, values, needs, hopes and assumptions to help them understand each other better.
- Help families to stop blaming each other and to begin exploring how everyone can work together to make things better.
- Help people to understand the effect their words and actions have on everyone else in the family.
- Explore what each person in the family does well, and what they are most proud of.
- Draw a kind of family tree, called a genogram, to help people think about the different relationships in their family.
- Help families to talk about the challenges they are facing
- Support families as they work towards their own goals.

## Can I see a family therapist on my own?



Yes. Family therapists can see children and adults on their own, or with other family members. Sometimes they offer a mixture of individual and family appointments, if they think that will be useful. Family therapists can also work with couples. Seeing a family therapist together can help people to understand and support each other better.

## What else do family therapists do?



Family therapists sometimes use their understanding of relationships to work with bigger groups and organisations. When they do this they often call themselves 'systemic psychotherapists' because they are working with systems rather than families.

Family therapists sometimes coordinate teams when several different agencies are supporting a family. They try to make sure that everyone is working together in a way the family finds helpful.

Many family therapists also supervise other professionals working with families and children.



## When is family therapy helpful?

Family therapy is useful for families and relationships that are facing all kinds of difficulties and experiences, such as:

- Families and couples who want to build closer and happier relationships.
- Families facing special challenges like alcoholism, mental illness, physical illness, bereavement, eating disorders, ageing, family conflicts, cultural adjustments, trauma, etc.
- Families who are worried about their children's behaviour.
- Families who are fostering and adopting children.
- Parents who want to divorce or separate in a way that focuses on their children's happiness and needs.
- Any family who would like someone to help them talk about difficult things together in a way that's safe, open, creative and useful.



## Looking for a family therapist?

If you think family therapy would be useful for you, or the families you're supporting, visit [www.aft.org.uk](http://www.aft.org.uk), and click on 'Considering Therapy?' Watch the short 'Messages of Hope' videos on the website to hear how family therapy has helped other people. Within the NHS most family therapists work in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services or Psychological Services for Adults. A variety of voluntary and third sector organisations also employ family therapists. Your doctor, health visitor or social care professional will be able to advise you if you would meet the specialist criteria for NHS services and also what else may be available in your area.

You can also self refer to a family therapist working in private practice, but there will be a fee for the family therapy sessions.

For details of accredited Family and Systemic Psychotherapists working independently in your area, search under 'Find a Therapist' on our website, [www.aft.org.uk](http://www.aft.org.uk), or contact the Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice (AFT) on 01925 444414.

