

An Introduction to Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

*Adapted from "What is Dynamic Psychotherapy" by
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Psychodynamic psychotherapy is a product of the evolution and modernization of psychoanalysis, which originated with the work of Dr. Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth century. It is one of many types of therapy used by mental health practitioners today. Generally speaking, therapy is both a way of understanding human emotions and of helping people with their relationships and their personal problems. In psychodynamic psychotherapy, specific problems are viewed in the context of the whole person. The mature or rational self that functions more or less successfully in the real world is only a part of the total person. The more immature, irrational, or unconscious self functions silently in the background to produce various symptoms and maladaptive behaviors that often intrude into the person's social life, personal relationships, school or work activities, and physical health. Because of the importance of addressing both the conscious and unconscious parts of the self, a compassionate quest for self-knowledge is seen as the most important key to changing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and to living a fuller, more satisfying life.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy is based on the insight that our personalities are the result of passing through and solving relationship issues at many developmental stages. At any stage, the way we have reacted to events in our lives may have caused us to get stuck at a certain level of insight or problem solving. While we go ahead and mature satisfactorily, in many ways we may carry within us the parts that didn't have a chance to develop. We can have a mature exterior and be functioning more or less successfully, while internally we may feel vulnerable, confused, depressed, angry, afraid, and childlike. We may not feel able to bounce back from rejection, get past blocks, allow our real feelings to surface, or stay in touch with our feelings and desires. Our physical health may be compromised in many ways by emotional and relationship issues.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy is designed to help the client get in touch with her or his unconscious memories, feelings, and desires that are not readily available to the conscious mind. It is designed to help clients of all ages understand how their unconscious feelings and thoughts

affect the ways they act, react, think, feel, and relate. Whether or not therapy works depends a great deal on the client's willingness and ability to experience all relationships deeply, especially the therapeutic relationship. Each client, by expressing her or his story in whatever ways possible to someone who knows how to listen and to give new meanings back, has the opportunity to learn about herself or himself in a new way.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy can provide a safe place for people to discover for themselves their own truths. It provides a unique opportunity to re-experience personal history in a new relationship, to see it in a new way, and to make connections between past and current conflicts that illuminate the way one relates to oneself and to others.

Clients are encouraged to talk about thoughts and feelings that come up about therapy or about the therapist. These feelings are important because elements of one's earliest affections and hostilities toward parents and siblings are often shifted onto the therapist and the process of therapy. This phenomenon, known as "transference," offers a rich source of understanding, for it offers the possibility for people to re-experience and re-work important feelings arising from the past with the maturity they possess in the present.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy is usually not a short-term therapy as it takes time to explore the complex layers of feeling and experience that make up a person's own unique relationship history. People find that their therapy can easily extend for several years but there is no prescribed length of treatment. Only the people closely involved have a sense of when personal goals have been met. When the client feels she or he has accomplished the desired goals, then a termination date can be set and agreed upon.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy aims to help people experience life more deeply, enjoy more satisfying relationships, resolve painful conflicts, and better integrate all the parts of their personalities. Perhaps its greatest potential gift is the essential freedom to change and to continue to grow in relationships.