

How do psychotherapy, counselling and CBT differ?

It's a bewildering question, particularly for those considering therapy for the first time. There are no agreed-upon definitions for the terms psychotherapy and counselling (CBT is a specific form of counselling). The terms are considered by some to be interchangeable.

So how do we differentiate them and how do we choose between them? Perhaps it's more helpful to consider the differences between a counsellor and a psychotherapist rather than counselling and psychotherapy - the practitioner rather than the activity - because, after all, it's a person being chosen.

According to information published by the NHS and UKCP ([United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy](#)), training is a good indicator.

Psychotherapists are generally trained to Masters Degree level. The [UKCP](#) website contends that the difference between counsellors and psychotherapists “...lies in the length and depth of training involved and in the quality of the relationship between the client and their therapist.” They only register psychotherapists trained to masters level.

Psychotherapy training is a minimum of five years of academic study combined with client work and compulsory personal therapy. When a psychotherapist qualifies he or she will have been in weekly personal therapy for five to six years and logged at least 450 hours of supervised client work.

Counsellors can also train to degree or masters level, but the minimum qualification is a Counselling Certificate and the most common award is a Diploma which takes two to three years. Many counselling courses require only minimum levels of personal therapy to be undertaken, or none at all in some cases.

This is how the [NHS Choices website](#) differentiates the two roles:

“Like counselling, the term psychotherapy is sometimes used to refer to talking therapies in general. However, psychotherapy is also a specific type of therapy. It may also be described as psychoanalytic or psychodynamic. Psychotherapy is a more in-depth form of therapy than counselling, and it can be used to address a wider range of issues. A psychotherapist can help you explore your thoughts, feelings and beliefs, which may involve discussing past events, such as those from your childhood. They will help you consider how your personality and life experiences influence your current thoughts, feelings, relationships and behaviour. This understanding should enable you to deal with difficult situations more effectively.

Depending on your problem, psychotherapy can be short or long term. Adults, young people and children can all benefit from psychotherapy.”

The most common talking therapy offered by the NHS is CBT counselling – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. CBT is brief and time limited. An applicant will commonly be offered six sessions once they reach the top of the waiting list. It focuses entirely on present problems with little interest in how these problems might have arisen. It is highly structured and aims to challenge negative thoughts to try and bring about immediate change.

This doesn't suit everyone however. Problems and issues which have developed and entrenched over decades and rooted in past experience can be difficult to deal with in six one hour sessions. CBT can certainly alleviate symptoms, but sometimes only temporarily. Psychotherapists often have clients who have had multiple attempts at CBT only to discover that positive change and greater happiness is often best achieved by understanding where we are now and how we arrived here, before attempting to navigate a course to somewhere else.