

Therapy Terms: Quick Reference

Plain-English definitions for every therapy terms term on Shrinktionary, in one printable sheet.

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Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Also: ACT

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT, is a type of talk therapy that teaches people to accept difficult thoughts and feelings while committing to actions that match their values.

Behavioral Activation

Also: BA

Behavioral activation is a therapy approach that helps people gradually add rewarding and meaningful activities back into their lives to counter the withdrawal and inactivity that come with depression.

CBT

Also: Cognitive behavioral therapy

CBT stands for cognitive behavioral therapy. It's a structured, evidence-based form of psychotherapy that helps people identify and change unhelpful thoughts and behaviors that maintain distress.

Cognitive Restructuring

Also: cognitive reframing

Cognitive restructuring is a core CBT skill for spotting distorted or unhelpful thoughts and reshaping them into more balanced, realistic ones.

Couples Therapy

Also: Couples counseling, Marriage counseling

Couples therapy is counseling for two partners working on their relationship together. It helps them understand recurring conflicts, communicate better, and decide how they want to move forward.

DBT

Also: Dialectical behavior therapy

DBT stands for dialectical behavior therapy. It's a structured talk therapy that teaches skills for managing intense emotions, tolerating distress, staying present, and improving relationships.

Distress tolerance

Also: Crisis survival skills

Distress tolerance is a set of DBT skills for getting through intense emotional pain without making things worse. It's about surviving a crisis, not solving it in the moment.

EMDR

Also: Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing

EMDR, short for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, is a trauma-focused therapy that uses guided eye movements or other rhythmic cues while a person recalls distressing memories.

Exposure and Response Prevention

Also: ERP

Exposure and Response Prevention, or ERP, is the gold-standard therapy for OCD. People face what triggers their anxiety while resisting the compulsion they'd normally do to feel relief.

Exposure Therapy

Also: Exposure-based therapy, Exposure and response prevention (ERP)

Exposure therapy is a structured form of cognitive behavioral therapy where a person gradually and repeatedly faces feared situations, objects, or thoughts so the fear response can fade over time.

Family Therapy

Also: Family counseling, Systemic therapy

Family therapy is a form of counseling that treats relationships and patterns within a family rather than one person alone. It helps families communicate better and support a member who's struggling.

Grounding techniques

Also: Grounding skills

Grounding techniques are simple coping skills that use the senses and the present moment to pull you out of overwhelming anxiety, dissociation, or flashbacks and back into the here and now.

Group Therapy

Also: Group psychotherapy

Group therapy is treatment delivered to several people at once with a trained therapist. Members work on shared goals while learning from each other's experiences.

Internal Family Systems

Also: IFS, Parts work

Internal Family Systems is a therapy approach that treats the mind as made up of distinct inner parts, each with its own role. It helps a person relate to those parts from a calm, compassionate core self.

Interpersonal Therapy

Also: IPT, Interpersonal psychotherapy

Interpersonal therapy (IPT) is a structured, time-limited talk therapy. It focuses on relationships and life changes, and it has strong evidence for treating depression.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

Also: MBCT

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) blends ideas from CBT with mindfulness practice. It has good evidence for helping prevent depression from coming back in people who've had repeated episodes.

Motivational Interviewing

Also: MI

Motivational interviewing is a collaborative counseling style that helps a person find and strengthen their own reasons for change. It's widely used in substance use treatment and other areas where ambivalence gets in the way.

Psychodynamic Therapy

Also: Psychodynamic psychotherapy, Insight-oriented therapy

Psychodynamic therapy is an insight-oriented talk therapy. It explores how past relationships and out-of-awareness feelings shape current patterns, with the goal of understanding yourself more deeply.

Psychoeducation

Also: Patient education

Psychoeducation is teaching people and their families about a mental health condition and its treatment. It's a standard part of care that helps people understand what they're dealing with and how to manage it.

Radical acceptance

Also: Acceptance skill

Radical acceptance is a DBT skill for fully accepting reality as it is, including painful situations you can't change, so you stop adding suffering to pain. Accepting isn't approving.

Schema Therapy

Also: Schema-focused therapy

Schema therapy is a longer-term approach that targets deep, self-defeating life patterns formed early in life. It blends cognitive, emotional, and relationship-based techniques to change those patterns.

Supportive Therapy

Also: Supportive psychotherapy

Supportive therapy is a practical, encouraging form of talk therapy that helps a person cope with stress and stay steady. It focuses on strengthening what already works rather than digging into the past.

Therapeutic Alliance

Also: Working alliance, Therapeutic relationship

The therapeutic alliance is the trusting, collaborative bond between a person and their therapist. It's one of the strongest predictors of whether therapy helps.

Transference

Also: transference reaction

Transference is when a person in therapy unconsciously redirects feelings, expectations, or patterns from an important past relationship onto their therapist. It's a normal part of treatment that can become useful material to explore.

Learn more: see all therapy terms at shrinktionary.com/categories/therapy-terms