

Systemic therapies

The skills service users can expect their therapists to have

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What are systemic therapies?

Systemic therapies are psychological treatments that can help people of all ages who have emotional difficulties and problems relating to other people; it can also help their families. Systemic therapists assume that a person's emotional problems arise from difficulties in their relationships with other people both inside and outside the family. So, when someone develops a psychological difficulty, systemic therapists see the problem as not just one for that person but also a problem for their family and other people who are involved in the person's life. This might include people at school, work and others who might be caring for the person. For systemic therapists two things are therefore important in any treatment:

- a) the person with the problem should not be treated in isolation from others in their life but helped to understand and solve their problems in relation to the important people in their life.
- b) when appropriate, the therapist will draw on the strength and support of families and other important people in the person's life to help solve the person's problems.

Systemic therapists also place a special emphasis on building on a person's strengths just as much as identifying any difficulties.

What does therapy involve?

Everyone's therapy will be a bit different, but we have tried to describe some of the important things that a good systemic therapist will do and what they will help you focus on. For most of the time during your treatment you can expect that other people such as a family member or a partner will also be involved in your therapy.

Starting off

All therapists aim to help you feel respected and to create a setting in which you (or your family) feel comfortable to talk. Many people find it difficult to speak about their problems (or their family) with someone they do not know. It is important, therefore, that your therapist conveys to you, and any other people involved in your therapy, that they can be trusted, that they can help everyone to talk about things which upset them or about which they feel embarrassed, and that everyone has something valuable to say.

Talking openly about yourself for the first time to a new person can feel difficult, especially if other family members are present, and you may be worried about what your therapist thinks about you (or your family). Your therapist will help you to make sense of any worries you may have about starting therapy. They ought to give you the feeling that they know that starting therapy can be difficult and also a sense that they understand what life is like for you. They should do this in a way that makes you feel safe and not threatened or intimidated by others who may also be present.

Getting an idea of what you need

Your therapist will usually try to get a good idea of what you are finding difficult in your life and how this is affecting you and the people close to you. They may ask you some questions and they may also talk to others involved in your life such as people at school or others caring for you. Your therapist should have your agreement first before doing this. You can expect them to make it clear that you only need to give as much information as you feel comfortable with. Many people find that as therapy gets going they are able to talk more openly. However, you shouldn't find yourself under pressure to say more than you want.

Explaining how systemic therapy might work for you

Early on your therapist should explain how systemic therapy works and help you to think about how it might help you. For example, getting in touch with how you feel about yourself or about other people could help you consider ways of dealing with things differently. It could also make it easier to accept things which are difficult but ultimately can't be changed. The early stages of therapy are about learning to trust your therapist and letting them get to know more about you. At first you may not be 100% convinced that systemic therapy is for you. This is not unusual and you may need to experience one or two sessions to fully make your mind up.

Sharing ideas about what you want to achieve

Some people start therapy with clear ideas about what problems they would like to overcome; other people may be less clear (for example, they may feel troubled, but not sure why). Working with your therapist will help to develop your ideas about the areas you might need help with. Of course, these needs may change over time, so your therapist will be flexible and focus on any new issues that arise. The main point is for you to be working with your therapist on matters that are important to you.

What can you expect of your therapist

Your therapist is responsible for ensuring that your meetings with them take place at a regular time, in a place where you can be sure of confidentiality. Wherever possible they ought to let you know if they expect to be away or need to change the time of your therapy.

Length and frequency of therapy

Your therapist will talk with you about the number of meetings you can expect to have. In practice the number of meetings you are offered can vary quite a lot depending on where you are being seen. Some people may see the therapist every week over a number of months; other people may only see them every 2 or 3 weeks. The important thing is that you understand from the beginning how long therapy is likely to last. There are some services where therapy is 'open-ended' – in other words therapy can go on until the therapist and service user agree that they are ready to stop.

Ending the therapy

Your therapist ought to make sure that you are clear about when the therapy will end. They will want to know how you feel about ending the therapy and give you time to talk about this. Your therapist will also help you to look to the future and think about the changes you have made. This could include thinking about how you will deal with any further problems and challenges.

Some differences between systemic therapies

Although all systemic therapies pay a lot of attention to building a good relationship with the service user, they do differ in some important ways as outlined below:

- Some therapists will let the service user take the lead – the therapist will follow what the service user wishes to talk about. Others may be more ‘active’ – they may draw the service user’s attention to behaviour or feelings that you (or your family) may not be fully aware of, or that they find difficult to put into words (for example, a service user who says that they are not worried by something, but actually looks very anxious, or who says they are feeling fine, but who looks very sad).
- Some therapists will encourage you to try out new ways of behaving and this might involve ‘role-playing’ or practicing different ways of doing things in the meeting. Therapists may also encourage you to write things down or draw such things as a family tree so that you may better understand the role the family might have played in the development of your problems or alternatively how the family may help in solving them.
- Systemic therapists may also involve other people in your treatment. Often systemic therapists will work as part of a team and more than one therapist may meet with you. When more than one member of a team is involved in your care the therapist should make it clear to you in what way other members of the team will be involved in your treatment.

If you want to find out more about the approach your therapist usually takes, you should feel free to ask them.

Finding out more

Some websites with helpful information about systemic therapies include:

The Association for Family Therapy (AFT), www.aft.org.uk/

United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) www.psychotherapy.org.uk/