

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is a treatment based on the theory that our present is shaped by our past. We are often unaware of how experiences can affect us. Painful feelings can remain in the unconscious mind and influence our current mood and behaviour and contribute to problems with self-esteem, personality, relationships and work.

Because we are unaware of these forces, common problem-solving techniques – such as seeking the advice of friends and family or reading self-help books– often fail to provide relief.

Psychoanalysis helps a person take control of these influences by tracing them back to their origins and understanding how they have developed over time. This awareness offers the person the opportunity to deal constructively with the way these influences affect their current life.

Conditions treated by psychoanalysis

Some of the problems treated by psychoanalysis include:

- Depression
- Generalised anxiety
- Sexual problems
- Self-destructive behaviour
- Persistent psychological problems, disorders of identity
- Psychosomatic disorders
- Phobias
- Obsessive compulsive disorders.

The unconscious mind

According to psychoanalysis, the unconscious mind gives hints of the unacknowledged meaning of experiences in different ways. Such hints may include:

- Repetitive behaviours
- Topics that the person finds difficult to talk about
- Dreams
- Daydreams
- The nature of the patient–therapist relationship.

Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is an umbrella term, which describes any form of treatment of the mind.

Psychoanalysis is a treatment based on studies of the conscious and unconscious human mind. All psychoanalysts have a primary qualification in psychiatry, psychology, social work or other health discipline. Well qualified researchers, educators and selected other professionals may also become psychoanalysts. Training standards for psychoanalysts are set by the International Psychoanalytical Association.

Psychiatrists are medically qualified doctors with postgraduate experience and training in treating mental illness, using both physical and some psychological treatments. Psychologists do not usually have a medical qualification, but have a degree in psychology and have studied mental processes and behaviour.

Finding a professional psychoanalyst

The title 'psychoanalyst' is not regulated by any Australian laws. This means that anyone can set up practice, even if they have no experience or training. It is important to find a psychoanalyst through a professional society.

Graduate psychoanalysts trained under the auspices of the Australian Psychoanalytical Society have had extensive clinical education. Candidates accepted for training must meet high ethical, psychological and professional standards.

The patient–therapist relationship

Psychoanalysis is a close relationship. The bonds that develop in the course of treatment create a safe environment for the person to reveal personal information.

The experience with the analyst is emotional as well as intellectual. For example, a person may have difficulty trusting their analyst. Discussing this may help them explore their problems with trust in their everyday life.

The analyst helps by fostering the bond with the patient and helping them interpret the meanings behind their thoughts. This can help the person refine, correct, reject and modify disturbing thoughts and feelings. During analysis, the person comes to terms with these insights, noting their influence on experience in daily life, in fantasies and in dreams.

By working with the analyst, the person can come to gain control over disabling life patterns and incapacitating symptoms. Over the course of time the person's behaviour, relationships and sense of self can change in deep and enduring ways.

The psychotherapy session

Regular treatment is needed to develop the closeness and intimacy required for this form of self-exploration. The patient sets their own pace and agenda for the treatment by saying everything that comes into their mind, to the best of their ability.

The setting for treatment is important. Regular session times usually last fifty minutes each week. This helps create a reliable environment in which a patient feels they can trust their psychoanalyst. An analysis may take months or years, because of the deep emotional work involved.

Patients are often asked to lie on a couch, which also helps create a setting of trust. However not all patients use a couch.

Most psychoanalysts will not take notes during a session with a patient. Taking notes could interfere with their task of listening and responding to the patient.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- The Australian Psychoanalytical Society Tel. (03) 9500 2199
- Adelaide Institute for Psychoanalysis Tel. (08) 8364 5357
- Melbourne Institute for Psychoanalysis Tel. (03) 9882 1661
- Sydney Institute for Psychoanalysis Tel. (02) 9958 0889

Things to remember

- Psychoanalysis is a type of treatment based on the theory that our present is shaped by our past.
- The unacknowledged meaning of personal experiences can influence our mood and behaviour, and contribute to problems with relationships, work and self-esteem.
- It is important to find a psychoanalyst through a professional society.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Psychoanalytical Society

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