



Family Therapy

Introduction

Family therapy is when two or more family members come into therapy rather than just one individual. You can choose to go to therapy with a partner, sibling, parent, or your entire family. In family therapy, the provider will often work with your family on their relationships and communication that might be making problems worse. Common issues addressed in family therapy include mental health conditions, relationship issues with a partner, stressful family transitions, chronic illness, sibling issues, parenting help, and behavior problems in children and adolescents.¹ For families with a member with developmental disabilities (DD), family therapy can be especially helpful to gain more information about how to best support an individual with a disability and the rest of the family. Research has suggested that family therapy can also help siblings feel included and involved in the healing process.² Even though the focus in family therapy is relationships, creating healthier family patterns can also be helpful in treating individual mental health conditions. Improved family patterns can help family members better support each other's mental health through healthy coping skills. While there are different approaches to family therapy, many of them use similar skills to help families improve their overall well-being.^{4, 5}

This fact sheet will explain:

- 1) How family therapy generally works;
- 2) What families can expect to do in therapy;
- 3) How families can make therapy successful; and
- 4) How to find a family therapist if you feel that family therapy is the right option.

How Family Therapy Works

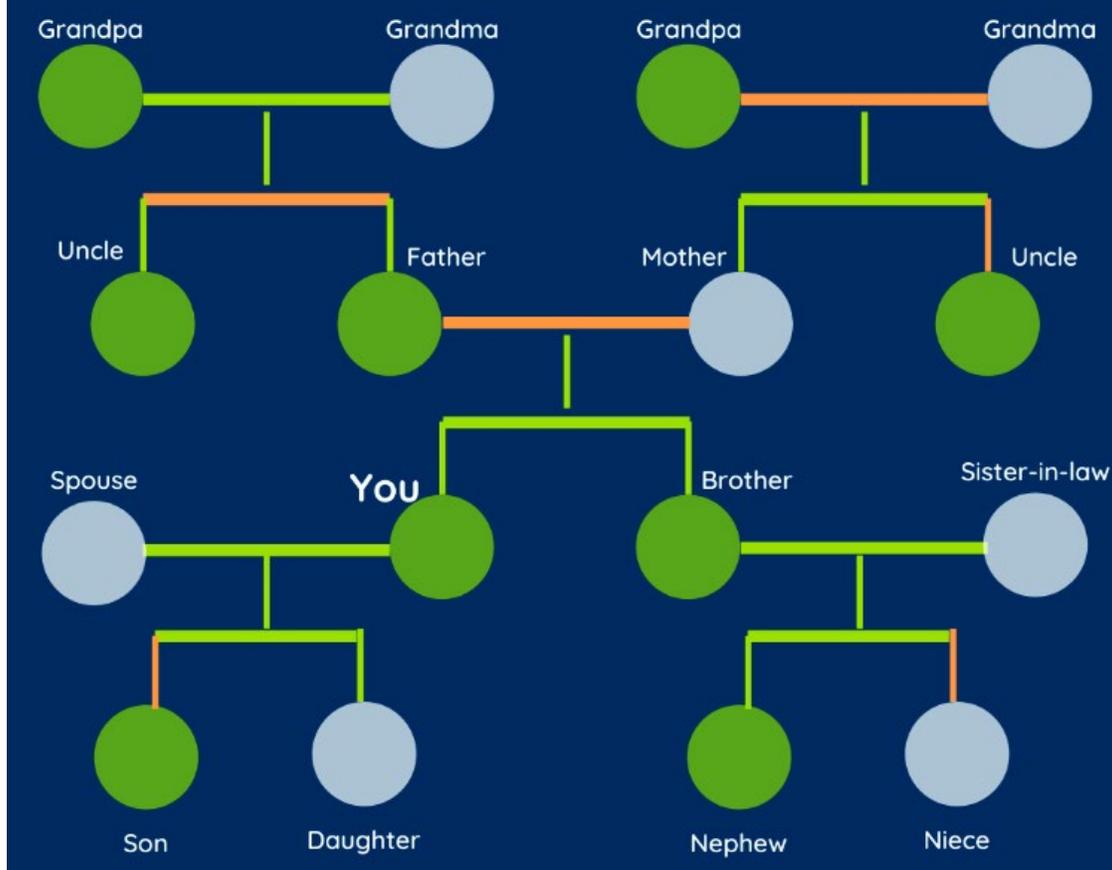
Family therapy methods treat the family as a whole, rather than just one individual in particular. If an individual goes to therapy, they might not improve as much as they could because their family is still struggling with the same problem. By working on improvements in the family, it helps to make sure that all the family members help with the solution to the problem.⁵ For example, if a child goes to therapy because of behavior issues, the child might show improvements during therapy, but when the child starts to interact with their siblings and parents, the issues continue. In cases like this, it would be more helpful to go through therapy with the whole family to figure out what family interactions are contributing the child's problem so that the all family members can help with a solution.

Often times, problems in families come from family rules or patterns that are not helpful. Family rules and patterns are the ways that family members interact with each other. These problematic rules and patterns are not any one person's fault, rather, all family members usually contribute to the problem in some way. Family therapy helps every person in the family see their own contributions to the problem, so that one particular person is not blamed. This way, all family members are able to work together toward a solution.⁵

First, the provider helps the family identify their consistent actions that might be making a problem worse. A provider might do this by creating a genogram, a picture that shows at least three generations of a family, similar to a family tree. This family tree picture is especially concerned with family relationships, interactions and patterns. While completing a genogram, providers are often looking for problematic patterns that may have been passed down from past generations as well as other information about the family that the provider needs



Genogram Example



to know. The provider might ask about how previous generations communicated, handled conflict, showed affection, and if there is any history of mental health concerns, trauma or substance abuse.⁴ If you complete a genogram with a provider, it might look like the example!

As the provider identifies possible family patterns that are unhelpful, they will likely use a skill called circular questioning. Circular questioning is when the provider asks each family member about their perspective and helps them understand each other's views. They might ask all family members to answer the same question, or they might ask one person to share their thoughts about other relationships in the family. In family therapy, perspectives of all family members are important and help guide the therapy process.⁵

The provider will also coach the family in changing their problematic patterns to be more helpful. To do this, they will likely teach you and your family communication and coping skills that you can practice in session and at home. The provider might also use a technique called an enactment. In enactments, a provider will interact with you and your family members in session while the provider coaches you through the interaction. Doing this can help your family practice changing their patterns to move toward a solution to the problem at hand.⁴

What to Expect in Therapy

Family therapy can look different depending on the family members that choose to come into therapy and the goals for therapy. The provider might also have suggestions about who should come into therapy. For example, they might want to do

sessions with the whole family, see different relationships within the family, or a mix of both.

The first session will likely consist of the therapist getting to know you and your family, understanding family patterns, and setting goals for therapy. Your family will likely meet with the provider once a week for 50-minute sessions. Therapy usually lasts about 9 to 20 sessions, depending on your family's specific circumstances and goals.¹ Each week, your family will likely receive homework exercises that will help you practice the skills that you are learning in therapy throughout the week.

How to Make Therapy Successful

Though the mental health provider will have tools and activities that can be helpful, you as the client also play a significant role in making therapy successful. Before seeing a provider, start thinking with your family about the goals that you want to accomplish in therapy and ways that you would like your life and relationships to improve.³ When your family meets with a provider, it is important to form a trusting relationship with them. You may want to ask some questions to get to know them better and make sure they are a good fit for you and your family. As you talk more about your goals for therapy, make sure that your provider is willing to support your family in these goals and hear the perspectives of all family members. Throughout this process, be willing to openly share your thoughts and feelings with the provider and your family members so that the provider can best help you. It is also important to be willing to recognize the role that you personally play in the family's problems and be willing to work as a team with your family to improve these issues.

How to Find a Family Therapist

If you feel that that family therapy would be helpful for you, the next step would be to find a provider. Providers often have websites or online profiles where they will share information about the method of therapy they use. You can also call their office to ask. Some websites have the option for you to search for providers that do family therapy. Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists (LMFT) have special training in working with couples and families. However, other types of providers might

Helpful Questions to Ask Your Provider

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use family therapy techniques as well.¹ Some different types of family therapy you may come across in your search include Cognitive Behavioral Family Therapy, Emotionally Focused Family Therapy, Contextual Therapy, Structural Therapy, Experiential Therapy, Narrative Therapy, or Solution-Focused Therapy.^{4, 5} When looking for a provider, it might be helpful to note what method they use and ask the provider how that method could be helpful to accomplish your family's goals.

Websites that allow you to search for providers:

[Psychology Today's Types of Therapy and Therapist Search Tool](#)

[GoodTherapy's Find a Therapist Tool](#)

[Therapist Locator](#)

Conclusion

Family therapy helps to improve the whole family system rather than one individual in particular. Overall, family therapy can be useful in working on relationship issues as well as mental health conditions. Identifying the ways that the whole family contributes to the issues at hand rather than

blaming one particular member, can help the family work as a team toward a solution.^{1, 4, 5}

Contributors

Raechel Russo, MS

Ty B. Aller, PhD

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