

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How can therapy help?

Therapy is for you. It's an opportunity to focus on how you feel and how you have been affected by things that have happened in your life or the lives of people close to you. Therapy can help you understand why you feel what you feel or do what you do. It can help you develop ways to take care of yourself when you feel anxious or sad or overwhelmed by whatever is going on in the present, and it can help put the past in the past, so that you no longer feel the hurt or fear as intensely. Therapy can help you feel safer in your body, more comfortable in your own skin. It can help you think about things in new ways and change the stories you've been telling yourself or that others have been telling you. Therapy doesn't fix all the problems in your life, of course, but it can help you breathe easier, feel more supported, and generally feel more able to deal with whatever you're dealing with.

What will happen in a session?

First sessions are usually a bit different from the rest, because your therapist may need to spend some time gathering information or talking with you about what to expect and answering any questions you have about the therapy process (though you can always ask questions at any time, not just during the first session). But in general, in a therapy session you will get to talk about whatever is on your mind, what you've noticed about your reactions to things ("I've noticed that I feel anxious whenever the phone rings," "I've noticed that I sometimes don't reach out to a friend even when I'm lonely,"), what's been stressful or frightening or sad, and also what's going well, what you want and care about and enjoy in your life. Your therapist will listen without judging you, and often without giving advice, because therapy is more about supporting you to figure out what you want and need than it is about someone else telling you what you should do. Your therapist may ask questions that invite you to go further or deeper and may offer observations that invite you to think about something in a new way. Your therapist may offer you some exercises or practices that can help you feel more at home in your body and more able to tolerate whatever emotions you're feeling. As well, your therapist may be trained in specific strategies or approaches that are designed to help people who have experienced trauma, and together you can discuss if any of those would be right for you.

What if there are things I'm not ready to talk about?

In therapy, you set the pace. If you do talk about painful things in therapy, you're not doing so because someone else needs you to talk about those things; you're doing it for yourself. Therapists understand how hard it can be to talk about some things or to feel that you trust the therapist enough to open up. A therapist might invite you to notice what feels hard about talking, but they won't pressure you to talk about anything you don't want to or don't feel ready to talk about yet.

If my family member is on death row with an active case, will the things I say in therapy hurt (or help) that case?

The laws about what a therapist can be asked to disclose in a legal context vary from state to state, but it's unlikely that your therapist would ever be asked by anyone associated with the courts to reveal anything about the content of your sessions. To be on the very safe side, though, you should avoid directly speculating about what you think happened regarding the crime your relative was charged with or repeating something your relative said to you about that crime, or anything along

those lines. In general, therapy is really designed to be about you and for you; it's about how you feel, what you've experienced, how the things that have happened to your family member have affected you. Of course, you may have a lot to say about your family member's situation – indeed, therapy can be an opportunity to talk about the whole range of feelings you have about that and the many ways it has affected you. But the details of your family member's case, including details about the crime, don't have to be (nor should they be) the focus of your sessions.

Does my therapy have to focus *only* on the impact of my family member's death sentence or execution?

No. Again, you're in charge of what you want to use your therapy sessions for. Some of the time, what may be most important to you is that you're finally getting to talk about the impact of your family member's death sentence or execution with someone who has been trained in that area and won't judge you. But at other times, you might want to talk about something else entirely. And when you're talking about other things, you'll be doing so with the knowledge that the therapist is aware of your identity as a family member of someone who has been sentenced to death or executed, so they have that understanding even when it's not the focus of your session. In summary: Sometimes, the best thing about therapy might be that you're able to talk about your family member's death sentence or execution. Sometimes, the best thing about therapy might be that you have an opportunity to focus on other aspects of yourself and your life for a while and get support there, too. Either way is absolutely fine.

Does going to therapy mean I have a mental health diagnosis – that is, that something is “wrong with me”?

If you are using health insurance to pay for your therapy sessions, your therapist will have to tell the insurance company a diagnosis (for example, something to do with depression, anxiety, or trauma). But that doesn't mean the therapist sees you only in terms of that diagnosis. Your therapist won't be thinking “how can I fix this person” as much as “how can I help this person feel supported and understood, manage the stresses they're dealing with, and address the hard things they've been through.” Sometimes, too, learning that what you have been feeling and experiencing meets the criteria for a mental health diagnosis – such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – can actually feel helpful to you, because now you have a name for the difficulty and a context for understanding what kind of mental health treatment would be most beneficial.

Can my therapist also work with my other family members?

If you are working with a therapist individually, you might at some point feel that you would like to invite a member of your family to a session so that you can talk about difficult issues with the support of the therapist. Most therapists who are working with someone individually will be open to having a family member join the session once or twice. If you wanted to attend therapy with your family members on a regular basis, that would typically happen with a different therapist, one whose job was specifically to do family therapy as opposed to individual therapy. If you are interested in that, you can ask your individual therapist how to make it happen, or you can ask us at TAVP's Access to Treatment Initiative to refer you to a therapist who has been through our training and is skilled at providing family therapy. The same is true if you want help finding an individual therapist for another member of your family.