



## **Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT)**

**What skills can service users expect  
their therapists to have?**

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## What is IPT?

IPT is a time-limited and structured psychotherapy. A central idea in IPT is that psychological symptoms, such as depressed mood, can be understood as a response to current difficulties in relationships. In turn, the depressed mood can also affect the quality of our relationships.

An example may help. If someone is depressed they may withdraw from those close to them, apparently refusing their help (perhaps because they feel like a failure and are ashamed of this). Family and friends may feel rejected and hurt, unable to understand why their offers of help are not taken up, and they may, in turn, pull away. The depressed person may take this as confirmation of their view of themselves as a failure, and this could make them feel even more depressed and withdrawn, setting up a vicious circle.

The main focus of IPT is on relationship problems and on helping the person to identify how they are feeling and behaving in their relationships. When a person is able to deal with a relationship problem more effectively, their psychological symptoms often improve.

IPT typically focuses on the following relationship difficulties:

- ***Conflict with another person:*** No relationship is perfect, but sometimes a significant relationship at home or at work can become very stuck in disagreements or arguments, and is a source of tension and distress.
- ***Life changes that affect how you feel about yourself and others:*** Life changes all the time. As it does it throws up new challenges, such as when we get married or lose a job. These changes - whether wished for or not - can leave us feeling unable to cope with the demands of the new situation and what is expected of us.
- ***Grief and loss:*** It is natural to feel sad following the loss of a significant person in our life. Sometimes, however, it can be very difficult to adjust to life without that person and we may then put our life on hold, unable to carry on with our normal activities and with our relationships.

For some people psychological symptoms are not triggered by a specific event, as in the examples above. Instead they are connected with a more general (sometimes a life long) difficulty in starting or keeping relationships going. Where this is the case IPT can help to improve communication with others.

## **What does IPT involve?**

Everyone's therapy will be a bit different, but we have tried to describe some of the important things that a good IPT therapist will do and what they will help you focus on.

### **Starting off**

All therapists should be able to help you feel respected and comfortable. Many people find it difficult to talk about their problems with someone they do not know, and it is important that your therapist can make you feel that they are to be trusted, and can help you manage if you talk about things which upset you or about which you feel embarrassed.

Talking openly about yourself for the first time to a new person can feel difficult and you may be worried about what your therapist thinks about you. Your therapist will be interested in how you experience them and will help you to make sense of any worries you may have about starting therapy. They should give you the feeling that they know that starting therapy can be difficult and that they understand what life is like for you.

The therapist should convey that they are interested in hearing about how you are experiencing the therapy and your relationship with them at any stage of the therapy. If difficulties do arise the therapist should take these seriously and work out with you a way of overcoming them.

### **Getting a picture of what you need ("Assessment")**

Your therapist will need to get as good a picture as they can of what you are finding difficult in your life and how this is affecting you and people close to you. They will ask some questions, but they should also 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, and in the early stages you shouldn't find yourself under pressure to say more than you want.

In the first sessions of IPT, the therapist will ask you both about your symptoms and also about current and past relationships in your life. This is because they are interested in understanding how difficulties in your relationships may have played a part in the development of your psychological symptoms. Your therapist will ask you questions to help you to take stock of the relationships that are important to you, looking at their strengths and any problems. The idea is to help you to identify those relationships that it would be most useful to focus on during the therapy.

At the start of therapy your therapist will also ask you to complete some questionnaires. These will give them a better idea of the sorts of problems you have (by asking about the sort of difficulties you have), as well as how badly these affect you (by asking how much each problem affects you). Your therapist will discuss the results of these questionnaires with you. They will ask you to complete the questionnaires again during therapy, often on a weekly basis, because this helps you and your therapist see what progress you are

making. This is very useful, because not everyone makes progress at the same rate. If the questionnaires show that you are not benefiting from therapy it gives you and your therapist a chance to think about why this might be.

Once you and your therapist have gained a clearer picture of the relationship difficulties that are connected with your symptoms, you will agree on the main areas that therapy will focus on. Bearing in mind that the therapy is time-limited, your therapist will also invite you to think about what you want out of the therapy and help you to identify goals that are realistic.

### **Explaining how IPT might work for you**

Early on your therapist should explain how IPT works, and help you to think through how the approach makes sense of what you are finding difficult in your life. Hopefully the assessment should have given you an idea of how the therapy works, what is expected of you and what you can expect of the therapist.

The main thing is that your therapist needs to help you see the ways in which ideas from IPT could be relevant to you and what you want help with. That does not mean you need to be 100% convinced – it's more that the idea of IPT and its focus on your current relationships needs to make some sense to you if you are going to get the best out of it.

### **What can you expect of your therapist?**

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

You can expect your therapist to be active: they will ask you questions, especially about your symptoms, what is happening in your relationships week-by-week, and how you feel. Because this is a time-limited therapy, your therapist will help you to keep focused on the relationship problem(s) you agreed to work on. This will include helping you to monitor how your symptoms are affected by what is happening in your relationships, and how your symptoms affect your relationships. The therapist will also help you to think about the people in your life who may be able to provide support to help you overcome your current difficulties. Where appropriate they will help you to develop new relationships that can provide the support you need.

The therapist will also help you make some changes in your life. For example, someone who fears that they will be rejected if they speak their mind might be encouraged to take the risk of trying out different ways of communicating more directly. Because this would probably be difficult at first, therapists will be keen to help clients think about any anxieties they have about putting into action ideas discussed in the therapy, and so support them in making these changes.

**Ending the therapy**

Many clients find that ending the therapy is difficult. This is because the relationship that develops between you and your therapist can become quite important. Ending therapy can feel like a big loss and you are likely to experience a range of feelings about it. Your therapist will know and understand this and you should expect them to help you to explore your feelings. They should help you to anticipate problems that may arise in the future and think with you about how you would manage if things became difficult again. However, they will also remind you of what you have learnt and achieved over the course of the therapy.

**Length and frequency of treatment**

Your therapist will talk with you about the number of sessions you can expect to have; this will depend on the problems you have and the setting you are being seen in. IPT is often offered over 16 sessions, but sometimes it is offered over fewer sessions (8-12). Your therapist might also suggest some follow-up, monthly sessions once you have completed the agreed course of therapy.

**Medication and IPT**

It is quite common to use IPT alongside medications such as anti-depressants, and for some people this may be more helpful than receiving either treatment alone. Your therapist will discuss this with you where appropriate.

**Finding out more about IPT**

You can find more information about IPT on the internet from the IPT-UK network site:

[www.interpersonalpsychotherapy.org](http://www.interpersonalpsychotherapy.org)