



ADAA Statement on Scientific and Non-Scientific Psychological Treatments

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You have anxiety and you have decided you need help from a mental health professional. By various counts, there are over 500 varieties of psychotherapies, and the number of medications for anxiety can be daunting to consider. Add to this the number of homeopathic or alternative remedies, and the options can make one's head spin. How do you begin to make sense of all of these choices for yourself or your loved ones?

Of course, these decisions should be made in consultation with your health care professional, but you can also advocate for yourself as well if you consider a simple question – is there good scientific evidence that supports the effectiveness of the treatment? This question can often be answered for prescription medications, because Food and Drug Administration approval requires positive results of multiple double-blind placebo-controlled trials of a particular medication for a specific disorder. In this way, it is possible to determine whether the changes seen during treatment are a specific result of the medication rather than the fact that you are going to see a doctor about your anxiety or that you are regularly taking a pill to help you feel better. Homeopathic medications or nutritional supplements, and devices such as those used for brain stimulation, can be marketed without this requirement of proof of their effectiveness.

But what about psychotherapies? There is no Food and Drug Administration for psychological treatments, and there is no universally accepted standard for what should tell us that a therapy is effective or even safe. However, there is a similar answer for psychotherapies (and for alternative treatments) – look at the research and let it guide you. If there is no research supporting the effectiveness of a psychotherapy, it may be still be useful, but it is unproven, that is, there is no evidence that the therapy works. If research were to be conducted, it might be supportive, but it might not, making unresearched psychotherapies a gamble.

When there is research on a psychotherapy, how can you evaluate it? Well, you could do an Internet search for articles reporting scientific studies of psychotherapies for specific problems, for example, cognitive behavioral therapies for social anxiety disorder or psychoanalytic therapy for panic disorder. If you do so, you can ask whether the therapy

- Is associated with changes in the target problem over time
- Produces greater changes in the target problem than is seen in a group of patients who are not treated but simply assessed and then re-assessed after some time has passed
- Produces greater changes in the target problem than is seen in a group of patients who are provided with basic supportive therapy or
- Produces greater changes in the target problem than is seen in a group of patients who received another treatment that has previously been supported by research
- Has been demonstrated to do so in multiple well-controlled studies

This is hard to do unless you are yourself a research scientist. Even if you can find the studies, they are not easy to understand without scientific training. However, the Society of Clinical Psychology, a division of the American Psychological Association, has already done much of the heavy lifting. We recommend that you visit their website on Research-Supported Psychological Treatments (<http://www.div12.org/psychological-treatments/>), where you will find descriptions of various treatments for the range of psychological disorders and an evaluation of the evidence in their support. You can also use their search tool to find a therapist who specializes in the specific treatment for the specific problem. ADAA has a similar Find-A-Therapist search tool (<https://anxietydepressionassoc.site-ym.com/?page=FATMain>).