INTERIM DEFINITION OF PSYCHOTHERAPY FOR PACFA

What is psychotherapy?

Psychotherapy is the comprehensive and intentional engagement between therapist and client for the healing, growth or transformation of emotional, physical, relationship, existential and behavioural issues, or of chronic suffering, through well-founded relational processes. The aim of psychotherapy is to support increased awareness and choice, and facilitate the development, maturation, efficacy and well-being of a client.

Psychotherapy involves what is known and what may not be known in personal functioning, usually referred to as “conscious and unconscious factors”. Through a holistic perspective it encompasses the mental, emotional, behavioural, relational, existential and spiritual health of a human being.

A psychotherapist engages with a person or group in a co-created process of deep listening and empathic exploration of experience. Together they may explore social factors that shape an individual’s life experience, behaviours, and values that shape their understanding of who they are in relation to others, and how they create meaning. Aspects of problem solving are integrated into an affective approach that involves deep structural adjustment of the psyche and encompasses the context of the whole person.

As well as talking, the client can choose from many approaches, including group interaction, art, music, dance, body work, drama, sand play, movement and energy work, and soul work.

Psychotherapy may be short or long term depending on many factors including the modality of psychotherapy, education and experience of the practitioner, level of the clients physiological and psychological disturbance, client choice and the willingness of the client to engage in the process of change.

What does a psychotherapist do?

Psychotherapists and clients work together to understand conscious aspects of the momentary experience of the client as well as bringing aspects that are out of awareness into awareness through diverse psychotherapeutic processes.

A key element of the practice of psychotherapy is the interpersonal relationship between the psychotherapist and the client. The interaction between therapist and client provide the relational encounter through which the client becomes aware of repeated patterns and ways of relating and develops insights, abilities, understandings and ways of being in the world.

Together, psychotherapist and client may refer to personal story, experiences in childhood, relationship history, imagination, hopes for the future, physical and psychological illness, and current relationships as well as matters of identity, which may include sexuality, spirituality, religion, ethnicity or culture.

What Issues does a psychotherapist deal with?

Many people enter psychotherapy because they are curious about themselves. They may seek to gain a more accurate and fuller picture of themselves, insights into why they behave the way they do, why they relate the way they do, and understanding of patterns that play out in their life.

Some clients are functioning satisfactorily and are seeking connection, revitalisation, meaning and increased creativity.
Other people come to a psychotherapist because they are experiencing discomfort, dissatisfaction, behavioural or relationship disturbances or suffering in their lives. Some are wanting a more stable, deeper exploration of issues that they may have been helped with by other professionals to deal with on a largely functional level as distinct from an internal transformational experience.

Psychotherapists work with people who have a wide range of presenting concerns. Some such concerns are: depression, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, eating disorders, self-harm, illness, addiction, grief, trauma, abuse, relationship difficulties in personal life or at work, communication, intimacy and commitment problems, and a yearning for more from life.

**What outcomes can be expected?**

Psychotherapy supports a process of change. A person may come to understand patterns of discomfort, dissatisfaction or suffering in their life. They may make meaning from this and be more able to make conscious choices that lead to a different experience of themselves and the world.

A person can develop a greater capacity to be in charge of their life, empowered and self-directing while sensitive in relationship with others. They may experience increasing joy, meaning, peace of mind and heart, intimacy with others, purposefulness, insight, creativity and self-knowledge.

The process of psychotherapy addresses deeper value, meaning and purpose of existing conditions and alleviates dysfunction in a person’s life. In addition, it goes further and addresses the foundations of longstanding patterns, supporting improved functioning. It can promote healing and integration of traumatic experiences and expand the responses that emerge in clients’ physical and emotional reactions and their thoughts and behaviours.

**What professional training and ongoing development does a psychotherapist have?**

Psychotherapists come from varied and diverse foundations, however each psychotherapist will have completed a substantial, experiential professional training in at least one psychotherapeutic modality which draws on a well-established theoretical base.

Psychotherapy trainees engage substantially in the process of their own psychotherapy with a professional psychotherapist who practices in the training modality. This ensures an adequate level of development of the psychotherapy practitioner, so they can be effective in challenging situations or refer appropriately if needed. Supervised client practice is a core component of training.

The training curriculum will have included extensive practical clinical skills and the integration of theories of psychotherapy, human development, human relations and human diversity. A sound familiarity with relevant current research in psychotherapy and rigorous ethical discernment are important components of training in the profession of psychotherapy.

Over time, the psychotherapist experiences and integrates into their practice a wide range of abilities and life experience. It has been said that the instrument of therapy is the self of the therapist. Ongoing supervision is essential for the qualified practitioner.

A psychotherapist has an implicit commitment to engage in additional personal psychotherapy work. Recognising when this is needed is an outcome of adequate training and a function of ongoing professional supervision. Practitioners connect with a network of their peers in order to maintain relevance and receive feedback on their functioning.

Psychotherapists continue supervision, professional development, personal psychotherapy work and involvement in a community of psychotherapists throughout their professional life.

Psychotherapists abide by a Code of Ethics for professional practice.