

7 days of Psychology

Clinical Psychology

What is clinical psychology?

Clinical psychology is the psychological specialty focused on the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of psychological problems and mental illness.

Clinical psychologists are:

- Trained in the assessment and diagnosis of major mental illnesses and psychological problems.
- Trained in the delivery of a range of techniques and therapies that have been shown to help people with mental illness and psychological problems.
- Experts in helping individuals, groups, families, organisations and communities understand more about mental illness, its impacts and how to address it.
- Involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of new and novel therapies.
- Skilled in reading and understanding the latest psychology research and applying it in a tailored way to helping those with mental illness and psychological problems.
- Qualified to provide expert opinion in clinical areas.

Where might you find clinical psychologists?

They are hiding everywhere!

Just kidding....

Clinical psychologists work anywhere where people with mental illness and psychological problems might be found: private practice, general medical practices, hospitals, community health and mental health services, workplaces, educational settings and government services (e.g. Centrelink).

In these settings they are typically providing direct clinical psychology services to individuals, groups, teams, families, organisations or communities.

In addition to this clinical work, clinical psychologists may also be involved in research, teaching and supervision, program development and evaluation, public policy and other activities that promote psychological health in individuals, families, groups, and organisations.

Why would I see a clinical psychologist?

People see clinical psychologists for a variety of reasons:

- They have been diagnosed with a mental illness and it's been recommended they see one.
- They've not been diagnosed with a mental illness but have been struggling with feelings of anxiety, depression, high levels of stress, or feeling that they are not coping.
- They are struggling to come to terms with a recent trauma in their life (e.g. car accident, loss of a loved one).
- They are finding it hard to make significant changes in their life such as changing jobs, losing weight, or giving up smoking.
- They are having significant relationships difficulties, either personal or in the workplace.
- They feel lost or directionless in their life.
- They are trying to cope with significant physical or emotional disabilities.

Whilst it used to be the case that people only saw clinical psychologists in relation to mental illness or significant psychological problems, more people are now seeing clinical psychologists in order to improve themselves and their quality of life. For example, a young entrepreneur might see a clinical psychologist in order to get help in achieving their business goals through increased focus and productivity.

What does a consultation with a clinical psychologist involve?

A typical consultation with a clinical psychologist is usually one hour (or maybe a little longer for assessments) and takes place in a private consulting room. There might be a couch, but it may just be a comfy chair :)

In early consultations, the psychologist will want to understand what brought you to see them. This will involve talking more broadly about what is concerning you, and then more specifically about the thoughts, feelings, situations, symptoms or people that you are struggling with. In these consultations, the psychologist is getting to know you and vice versa. During these consultations, the psychologist might ask you to complete some questionnaires to get a better picture of what is happening for you.

As you both come to a good understanding of what the main issues are, subsequent consultations are then focused on helping you develop effective ways of controlling and coping with these difficulties, and implementing changes to enhance wellbeing and alleviate the problems. Sometimes psychologists use questionnaires in an ongoing way to see whether your symptoms are improving over time.

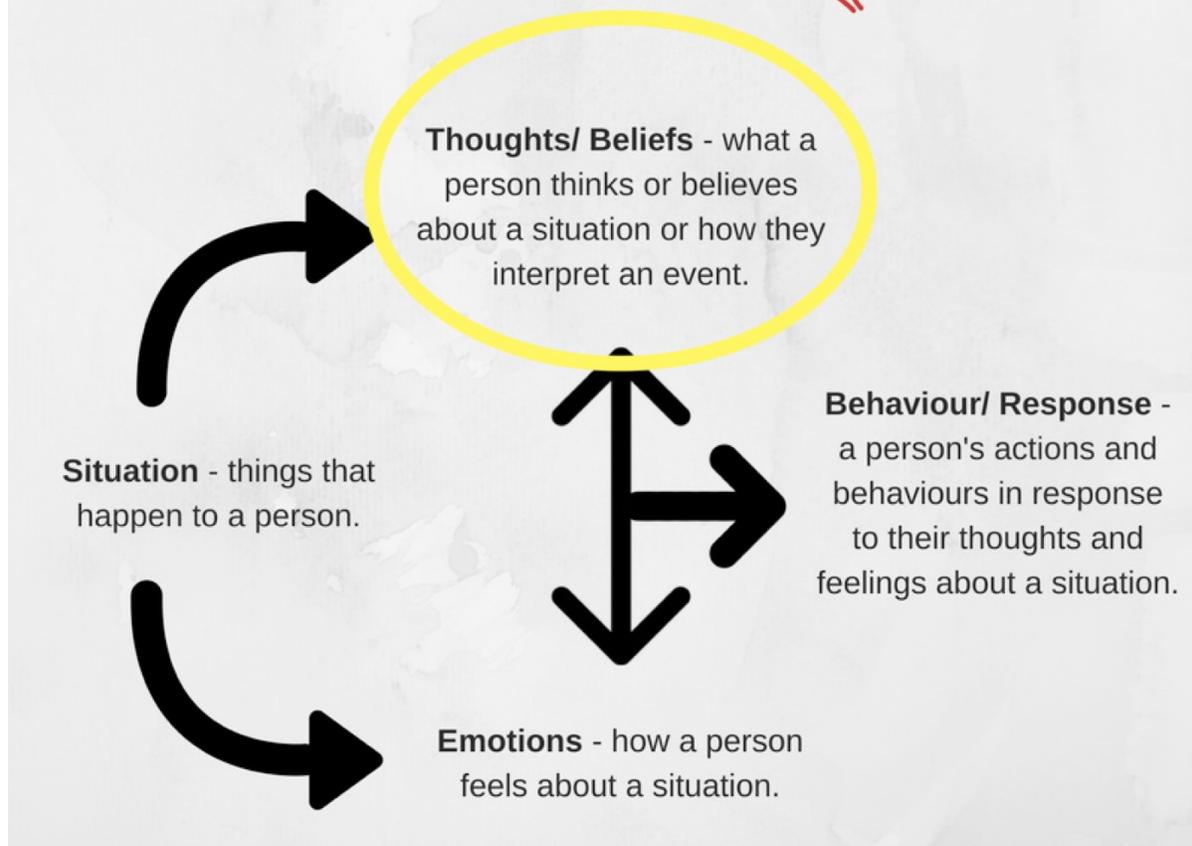
The number of sessions you will need is difficult to predict, but will be addressed by your psychologist. As you will read later (in the myths and misconceptions section), the idea that you will need many consultations over many years is a myth.

What are some of the interesting things that clinical psychologists and clinical psychology have given us?

One of the biggest contributions to society of clinical psychology research and practice has been cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT is a style of therapy that focuses on the role our thoughts and beliefs play in how we respond to and react to situations in our lives (see figure below).

Essentially, CBT holds that an individual's feelings and behaviours in any given situation make sense if you understand how they have interpreted and how they are thinking about the situation. Because our thoughts and beliefs are not always consciously available to us, CBT uses techniques to help individuals better understand their thoughts and beliefs.

The cognitive behavioural model



Many psychological disorders can be conceptualised as arising from irrational or unhelpful ways of thinking. CBT uses techniques to help individuals change those ways of thinking.

CBT is now used to treat a variety of psychological disorders including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, anger, substance misuse, problem gambling, eating disorders, and relationship problems. Furthermore, CBT principles can now be found in many self-help books, websites and mobile apps meaning these principles are getting more widely known.

Clinical psychology has also directly and indirectly contributed to the development of other types of therapy such as Interpersonal Psychotherapy, Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy,

Solution-focused Brief Therapy, Narrative Therapy, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, Schema Focused Therapy and Psychodynamic Psychotherapy. Yes, that is a lot of therapies!! A google search of any of these terms will start you on your journey of learning more.

What is a finding from clinical psychology that I can apply in my own life?

You do not have to see a clinical psychologist in order to benefit from some of the ideas from clinical psychology.

In Australia, we are lucky that clinical psychologists (as well as other mental health professionals) have been involved in developing lots of excellent websites, web courses and mobile phone apps that you can use to improve your mental health.

Recently the Commonwealth Government released the [Head to Health](#) website which can help you find some of these excellent online resources.

Take for example the [Moodmission](#) app, which was developed by psychologists to help you find new and novel ways to cope with difficult feelings. Free to use and available right on your phone!

Also, the depression and anxiety course offered by [This Way Up](#) offers a full CBT based treatment program for people who struggle with both symptoms of anxiety and depression, for a cost of \$59. This is a cost-effective way of learning about some clinical psychology treatment techniques.

LESSON INFORMATION

What lessons will the course cover?



LESSON 1

About Anxiety And Depression – Learn about your own symptoms of anxiety/depression, and learn to deal with the physical symptoms of anxiety/depression.

LESSON 2

Identifying Thoughts And Tackling Low Activity – Learn to identify the thought symptoms of anxiety/depression, and learn to face the behaviours associated with anxiety/depression.

LESSON 3

Dealing With Thoughts – Learn to confront the thought symptoms of anxiety/depression.

LESSON 4

Tackling Avoidance – Learn to challenge avoidance behaviours associated with anxiety/depression by facing your fears.

LESSON 5

Mastering Your Skills – Learn to master your ability to face your fears using graded exposure, and learn to cope with the distressing emotions associated with anxiety/depression.

LESSON 6

Staying Well – Learn how to avoid relapses and how to keep getting better!

What are some myths or misconceptions about clinical psychology?

Clinical psychologists are only for people with serious mental health problems

Not true. Clinical psychologists work with people with a range of psychological difficulties, not just those with serious mental illness diagnoses. For example, clinical psychologists work with people on relationships difficulties, who are adjusting to new situations (e.g. workplaces) or who are trying to make changes to their behaviour such as diet or physical activity.

Therapy is just common sense

It is true that some suggestions a clinical psychologist might make are common sense, like eating a good diet or getting plenty of exercise. However, clinical psychologists are specialists in helping people cope with tough feelings that don't respond as readily to basic interventions. These situations might require techniques and strategies that aren't necessarily well known to the general

public, like progressive relaxation, biofeedback, behavioural experiments and mindfulness meditation. Sometimes a medication might be indicated and clinical psychologists (whilst not prescribers) can help individuals think through whether a medication might be appropriate.

Clinical psychologists are mind readers

We wish! It would make life a lot easier for us, but it's not true. Whilst we might have some predictions on how you are thinking based on our previous experience, we actually need to work closely with you in order to understand what is going on in your head.

Clinical psychologists can only help if they've experienced the same thing

Whilst personal experience can help in empathising with a client's situation, the expertise that clinical psychologists have is more focused on what strategies and programs have been shown to help clients in similar situations. It is far more important that the clinical psychologist has training and knowledge about interventions for people who have your particular issue, than whether they have their own experience of the issue.

There is no difference between seeing a clinical psychologist or talking with a family member or friend

Family and friend supports are hugely important and it is great if you have family and friends that you feel comfortable chatting to about difficult stuff. This is not always the case though and a clinical psychologist can be helpful when you don't have someone to talk to, you want a confidential space to chat about your issues, or you want an expertly trained perspective on your problems.

You can get better on your own if you just try and keep a positive attitude

There is definitely a lot you can do on your own to [improve your mental](#)

health. However, sometimes problems can get to a point where we run out of ideas, or feel overwhelmed. At those points, it's helpful to get professional help, even if just briefly to find out about alternatives.

Clinical psychologists are going to focus on your childhood

Your childhood is important. Part of your adult personality and beliefs are shaped by your childhood. However, it is not the only thing of importance. Important also are your adult experiences, family, your workplace, your friends, and your financial situation. Yes, your childhood may come up in discussions, but not just for the sake of it. You can also do lots of great work in the present moment, without needing to looking back that far.

You have to see a psychologist for a long time

Clinical psychologists want to teach you skills so that you can manage your mental health successfully on your own. Therapy might take a while if you have a number of issues to deal with, or they are quite severe, but generally psychologists will want to help you work in the most efficient way to get the outcomes you want. For many, it may only be a handful of sessions that are required to make significant improvements.

You should immediately bond with the first clinical psychologist you see

Just like in everyday life where there are people you like and people you don't, there will be psychologists that you get along with well and trust, and others that you don't. Whilst it can be annoying and time consuming to try to find another, don't worry if the first clinical psychologist you meet doesn't quite feel right. It is perfectly normal to request to see another psychologist.

What do I do if I want to see a clinical psychologist?

Talk to your GP. They probably have clinical psychologists that they refer to

regularly. You can also have an initial chat about why you want to see one.

You might also want to contact one of the online or telephone mental health support services, which are free of charge. It's another opportunity to talk about why you might want to see a psychologist.

Finally, if you just want to go directly to a psychologist, you can use this 'find a psychologist' service in Australia.

<http://www.psychology.org.au/FindaPsychologist/>

Where can I read more?

<http://www.believeinchange.com/>

<https://psychopaedia.org/>

<http://www.believeinchange.com/Home/About-Us/Areas-of-Psychology/Clinical-psychology>

What if I want to study to become a clinical psychologist?

A google search for 'clinical psychology' will yield multiple results relating to universities in Australia that offer a clinical psychology course. Pick one in your local area and start reading. Keep in mind that studying to be a clinical psychologist is at least a 6-year commitment.

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3/9 St Leonards Court

Glenelg North, SA 5045

Australia

