

Introduction to Psychological Theories in Counselling

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Designed as a quick-reference guide for students and practising counsellors.

1. Why Theories Matter in Counselling

Purpose	What It Looks Like in Practice
Framework for understanding	Provides a lens to interpret client behaviour, thoughts, and emotions.
Guides intervention selection	Matches techniques (e.g., cognitive restructuring, exposure) to the client's presenting issue.
Facilitates professional identity	Helps counsellors articulate their approach and justify decisions to supervisors or clients.
Promotes ethical practice	Encourages evidence-based work and ongoing self-reflection.

2. Major Psychological Theories & Their Counselling Applications

Theory	Core Assumptions	Key Concepts	Typical Counselling Techniques
Psychoanalytic / Psychodynamic	Human behaviour is driven by unconscious processes and early relational patterns.	Id, ego, superego; defense mechanisms; transference, countertransference; psychosexual stages.	Free association, dream analysis, interpretation of resistance, exploration of past relationships.
Behaviourism (Classical & Operant)	Behaviour is learned through stimulus-response associations and reinforcement.	Conditioning, reinforcement schedules, stimulus control, extinction.	Systematic desensitisation, exposure therapy, token economies, behaviour contracts, skills training.

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Cognitive Theory	Thoughts shape emotions and behaviours; maladaptive cognitions can be restructured.	Automatic thoughts, core beliefs, cognitive distortions, schema.	Cognitive restructuring, thought records, Socratic questioning, guided discovery.
Humanistic / Person-Centered	People have an innate tendency toward growth; therapeutic relationship is central.	Unconditional positive regard, empathy, congruence, self-actualisation.	Reflective listening, client-led agenda, emphasis on present experience, facilitation of self-exploration.
Existential	Humans confront ultimate concerns (death, freedom, isolation, meaning).	Authenticity, responsibility, freedom of choice, "existential anxiety."	Exploration of meaning, confronting "givens" of existence, facilitating authentic decision-making.
Gestalt	Awareness of the "here and now" and integration of fragmented parts leads to wholeness.	Figure-ground, unfinished business, contact boundary, phenomenology.	Empty-chair dialogue, role-play, body awareness exercises, "I-statements."
Narrative Therapy	People construct reality through stories; problems are separate from the person.	Dominant vs. alternative narratives, externalisation, deconstruction.	Mapping the problem, re-authoring conversations, documenting preferred stories, therapeutic letters.
Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT)	Change is goal-directed and builds on existing resources; the problem is not the focus.	Miracle question, scaling, exception-finding, compliments.	Goal-setting, identifying "what works," brief homework, future-oriented questioning.

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Integrative / Eclectic Approaches	No single theory explains all client needs; counsellors blend models based on case formulation.	Case formulation, therapist flexibility, evidence-based selection.	Tailored treatment plans drawing from multiple modalities, continuous outcome monitoring.

3. From Theory to Practice – A Simple Formulation Process

1. **Presenting Issue** – What brings the client to therapy? (e.g., anxiety, relationship conflict).
2. **Relevant Theoretical Lens** – Choose the model(s) that best explain the issue.
 - Example: Social anxiety ? Cognitive?Behaviour