

Overview of Counseling Theories

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Designed for quick reference and deeper study

1. Psychoanalytic & Psychodynamic Approaches

Key Figure	Core Concepts	Therapeutic Techniques	Typical Session Focus
Sigmund Freud	• Unconscious mind • Id, ego, superego • Psychosexual stages	• Free association • Dream analysis • Transference interpretation	Exploration of early childhood experiences and hidden conflicts
Carl Jung	• Collective unconscious • Archetypes • Individuation	• Active imagination • Symbolic analysis	Integration of personal and universal symbols
Melanie Klein / Anna Freud	• Object relations • Internalized “objects”	• Play therapy (children) • Analysis of defense mechanisms	How early relationships shape current relational patterns

Takeaway: Emphasizes insight into unconscious processes and how early experiences shape present behavior.

2. Humanistic / Person-Centered Approaches

Theorist	Foundational Beliefs	Core Techniques	Client Role
Carl Rogers	• Unconditional positive regard • Congruence • Empathic understanding	• Reflective listening • Summarizing feelings	Active participant; therapist provides a supportive, non-directive environment

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Theorist	Foundational Beliefs	Core Techniques	Client Role
Abraham Maslow	• Hierarchy of needs • Self-actualization	• Goal-setting aligned with growth needs	Seeks personal fulfillment and meaning
Rollo May	• Existential freedom & responsibility	• Exploration of meaning, anxiety, authenticity	Engages in confronting existential concerns

Takeaway: Focus on the client's capacity for growth, self-direction, and the therapeutic relationship as a catalyst for change.

3. Cognitive-Behavioral Approaches

Model	Main Assumptions	Interventions	Evidence Base
CBT (Beck, Ellis)	• Thoughts → emotions → behavior • Cognitive distortions maintain distress	• Thought record • Socratic questioning • Behavioral experiments	Strong empirical support for anxiety, depression, PTSD
REBT (Ellis)	• Irrational beliefs cause emotional upset	• ABC model (Activating event, Belief, Consequence) • Disputing irrational beliefs	Effective for anger, perfectionism
Schema Therapy (Young)	• Early maladaptive schemas drive chronic problems	• Schema mode work • Limited re-parenting	Proven for personality disorders
Mindfulness-Based CBT (e.g., ACT, DBT)	• Acceptance + values-guided action	• Mindful exposure • Skills training (distress tolerance, emotion regulation)	Robust data for borderline PD, chronic pain, substance use

Takeaway: Structured, skill-building interventions that target maladaptive thoughts and behaviors; highly manualized and research-validated.

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4. Systemic & Family Therapies

Approach	Key Concepts	Techniques	Typical Applications
Structural Family Therapy (Minuchin)	• Family hierarchy & boundaries	• Joining, enactments, boundary restructuring	Family conflict, behavioral problems in children
Strategic/Brief Therapy (Haley, Madanes)	• Problem?		