

Are you ready for therapy?

If the US goes crazy for something, it's not long before we Brits are raving about it, too. Wheatgrass shots and *The Wire*, anyone? So why is therapy – so popular in America – only now beginning to take off in the UK?

WORDS ALEXANDRA SHAKESPEARE

Who do you turn to when everything gets a bit much? For most of us, a rant over a drink with a friend or a good cry on our partner's shoulder is the closest we get to bearing our innermost emotions. Even in an age where we share the most intimate details of our lives on sites like Twitter, most of us still squirm at the thought of confessing all to a therapist.

Bottling up our anxieties has always been the British way, unlike in the US, where people discuss their therapy sessions as if they're some kind of hot new spa treatment. 'For years, we've been behind America in terms of therapy,' says Kate Anthony, co-author of *Therapy Online: A Practical Guide* (Sage Publications, £19.99) and co-founder of www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com. 'In America, the attitude is, "I have a problem, get me a therapist." We Brits have been conditioned to try to cope on our own, seeing offloading on a pro as a taboo.'

While putting up and shutting up is a coping mechanism we've developed to pull us through in the short-term, experts say that keeping a stiff upper lip can →



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actually makes us ill. The mental health charity Mind says a staggering one in four of us is affected by a mental health issue in our lifetime, and, by next year, it's predicted that there will be a 26% increase in the number of us with such issues. The Government has pledged to provide more 'talking treatments', such as cognitive behavioural therapy, on the NHS over the next two years and is investing £173 million to make it happen. Help is becoming more accessible – and affordable – but will it thaw our British reserve for good?

'In the past, most Brits thought you had to be mad, bad or very sad to have therapy,' says communications psychologist Simon Confino. 'That's increasingly not the case. Many women are realising that conversations with friends and family are not enough, and are gradually turning to therapy for answers.'

Emotional outreach

A key turning point, says Phillip Hodson, fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), was the 'Dianafication' of society. The collective mourning after the princess's death in 1997 allowed the nation to get back in touch with its emotions, he claims. Over a decade later, 83% of us say we'd consider having counselling or psychotherapy, while BACP reported a 7% to 10% increase in membership in the last year.

No wonder the Government is exploring innovative approaches, such as a computer-based counselling service called Beating The Blues (BTB), a short-term alternative to antidepressants. Designed for those with mild to moderate depression, BTB uses cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques delivered through a PC at home or in the doctor's surgery. Recommended by the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), it's available on referral



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SO WHAT IS...?

■ **CCBT** (computerised cognitive behaviour therapy) is a progressive form of counselling for mild depression that is completed by the individual alone on a computer. It examines learned behaviour to help change negative thought patterns.

Look it up www.beatingtheblues.co.uk; www.bacp.co.uk; www.cbtregisteruk.com

■ **NLP** (neuro linguistic programming) combines cognitive behavioural therapy techniques with hypnotherapy to give an insight into

communication and self-awareness. It provides practical tools that can help change negative behaviour patterns.

Look it up www.ukcp.org.uk and www.nlptca.com

■ **E-therapy** is a way of expressing your feelings via internet media including webcams, emails, instant messaging (MSN), chat rooms, message boards and virtual reality websites such as www.secondlife.com (a 3D virtual community).

Look it up www.acto-uk.org and www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com

■ **Hypnotherapy** uses a trance-like state to encourage open-minded thought to effect a positive change.

Look it up www.thehypnotherapyassociation.co.uk

■ **Yoga therapy** Yoga's deep 'belly breathing' combined with strenuous physical poses can calm your nervous system to provide an effective treatment for anxiety-based depression. It does this by releasing endorphins and lowering the levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

Look it up www.yogatherapy.org

PLAY IT SAFE

Before you take to the couch or pour your heart out via your PC, check that your counsellor has the relevant qualifications and experience at www.bacp.co.uk.

from your GP. Otherwise an eight-session course costs £295 at www.beatingtheblues.com/connect. Experts estimate that BTB could treat 200,000 patients annually, cure 25,000, and save the NHS £125 million a year.

The virtual couch

But with one in four people surveyed by YouGov saying it's hard to find time to see our GPs for regular appointments about longer term issues, many people may never hear about free GP-referred services like BTB. 'The need for convenience, quality and choice is driving people to go online and take control of their wellbeing,' says David Kelnar, founder of Greatvine.com, a website that allows people to arrange consultations over the phone directly with health and wellbeing specialists.

Therapy on our PC is useful for those of us who are too embarrassed to seek face-to-face help, with 16% turning to the internet for just that reason. 'Online, people say things that they wouldn't normally say, and are a lot less reserved. Therapy has lost its taboo and this shift in attitude is thanks to the internet,' says Kate Anthony. And she thinks cyber therapy can be more effective, too. 'Face to face, you may need 12 sessions but, with online clients, therapists can get to the heart of the matter in about four. It's partly because there is none of the bias and judgement that you get when sitting opposite someone.'

Cue a host of online solutions that are available whenever we need them, be it an e-life coach who will ping you a weekly email of encouragement, or video-cam counselling that can be done from your front room.

For self help and anger management, motivational podcasts are taking off and are highly rated by Kate Anthony, who is pioneering ethical guidelines for online therapy. For eating disorders there are PC image-manipulation facilities: you select images of what you think you look like and your ideal body image, which the therapist then uses to help you gain a better perspective. And for phobias and post-traumatic stress disorder there is the virtual environment therapy (www.virtuallybetter.com) used with the help of a trained therapist, which, by recreating the traumatic

environment, can help victims come to terms with bad memories and fears.

This is one area in which we're actually ahead of our American cousins. 'Britain is leading the way with computerised CBT, which hasn't really taken off Stateside, mainly because they don't have a National Health Service to promote and distribute it,' says Kate Anthony.

Recession blues

Almost nine out of ten people agree that it's more acceptable to talk about your feelings now than it was in the past. And with 1.2 million of us plagued with so-called 'recession depression', it's just as well. 'The recession has given us a desire to re-centre ourselves on what's important,' claims David Kelnar. 'Beyond money and possessions, we are asking if we are happy, fulfilled and making the most of our talents. And, to find the answers, we're increasingly turning to experts to help us release our potential.'

Demand is so high that Relate, the UK's largest provider of relationship counselling, has received £1 million from the Government to offer subsidised counselling to couples and families who have been affected by the recession. 'Counselling definitely has a role to play in helping us with our everyday lives,' says Relate's Mel Merritt.

Accepting therapy has been a stepping-stone process that best suits the British mentality, says Carla Miller, founder of life coaching website Space to Be (www.spacetobe.co.uk). 'From self-help books in the 1980s to therapies such as yoga and acupuncture in the 1990s, we've moved up to life coaching, CBT and online therapy. We're finally sorting our day-to-day chaos.'

Only then, say the experts, once we're as confident spilling the details of our CBT sessions as we are discussing our yoga class, will we catch up with our American counterparts. But for now it seems, we Brits are taking the first steps into self help and seeing results. So log on, act now or make that call – by this time next year – everyone will be doing it... ☑

ONLINE THERAPIES THE LOWDOWN

GETTING STARTED Before your therapy sessions start you'll be asked to either fill out an online questionnaire about yourself or attend a face-to-face consultation. You can book future sessions using therapists' online calendars, via instant messaging, email, over the phone or by filling in online forms

EMAIL 'Exchanging emails allows you to send your therapist detailed information about your situation, in your own time,' says Kate Anthony. 'The therapist can then return an email with their feedback, suggestions and recommendations.' Unless you specify set times for responses, both you and the therapist take as long as you need to reflect before replying. Dr David Kessler of the University of Bristol, who recently led a study on the effectiveness of online therapy published in *The Lancet*, says: 'We think that writing gives people time to pause and reflect, and that this may help the therapeutic process.'

LIVE ONLINE CHAT In general, instant messaging is conversational in style while live web cam streaming is more like an in-person therapy session. In both cases, a fast broadband connection is needed. Session times are agreed beforehand. To safeguard your privacy, make sure all sessions are on a secure and encrypted server.

COSTS Online therapy tends to be cheaper than seeing a therapist in person because they don't have the overheads of travel and premises. Face-to-face sessions start at about £45 an hour compared with what Kate Anthony describes as 'a realistic average of £25 for a session that is usually an hour chat via instant messaging or an exchange of emails.' You can book a one-off session or a package of a specific number of email exchanges. There are also practitioners who work open-ended with clients, but pre-booked courses tend to work out cheaper. Payment is usually taken in advance.