



# Information sheet

## What does research tell us about Family Therapy?

[www.aft.org.uk](http://www.aft.org.uk)

**An AFT information sheet for people considering Family and Systemic Psychotherapy (Family Therapy) for themselves and/or with their partner or family.**

### Does it work?

An analysis of available evidence published in 2005 concluded that Family Therapy for couples and families *'is now an empirically supported therapy in the plain English sense of the phrase - it clearly works, both in general and for a variety of specific problems.'*

Subsequent reviews have come to the same conclusion. This kind of research averages together results from different situations. So your next question might be...

### Would it work for me?

There's nobody else exactly like you in your particular situation, so there can never be a direct research answer to that question. Yet we can look more broadly at situations in which Family and Systemic Psychotherapy has been shown to be effective \*.

Research studies tend to use labels to describe various conditions but family therapy recognises that distress and many forms of problems do not have clear names we can put on them and often problems are combined and join together. So if the difficulties you are experiencing do not simply fit with the terms below this does not mean that family therapy is not potentially relevant and helpful.

A 2009 review of research listed the following circumstances in which Family Therapy had been proven to be effective for children, adolescents and the important people in their lives

- problems in infancy; sleep, feeding and attachment;
- child abuse and neglect
- child and adolescent conduct problems such as behavioural difficulties, attention and overactivity (ADHD), and delinquency
- emotional problems including anxiety, depression, grief, bipolar disorder and suicidality
- body-related problems including enuresis, encopresis, recurrent abdominal pain, and poorly controlled asthma and diabetes
- drug abuse
- eating disorders including anorexia, bulimia and obesity.

[www.aft.org.uk](http://www.aft.org.uk)

Research reviews also indicate effectiveness of Family Therapy for adults and families affected by:

- o relationship difficulties
- o psychosexual problems
- o domestic violence,
- o mood disorders: anxiety and depression;
- o alcohol and drug abuse,
- o schizophrenia,
- o adjustment to chronic physical illness

Positive results have been reported for adults with anorexia and bulimia, however the evidence is stronger when people are brought to family therapy in adolescence. The most positive results in treatment of psychosis are seen when systemic and family therapy is made available as soon as symptoms start to appear.

This summary aims to indicate the range of problems that Systemic and Family Therapy has been proven to help, so you can judge whether it is likely to be useful in your situation. It is an impressive variety. There are many other circumstances in which Family Therapy seems to be useful but which, as yet, have no clear research evidence. As NICE (the [National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence](#)) points out, lack of evidence doesn't mean an approach isn't useful – simply that research hasn't yet shown it be so.

AFT has become interested in gaps in the research. Two age groups stand out: 17 to 21 years and over 65. It is interesting that while family therapists provide a substantial amount of therapy with both age groups, these groups are the ones for which there is current concern about the limited NHS Mental Health provision. Our clinical experience certainly does not indicate that these age groups have fewer problems than others.

### **Have we been surprised by this variety of proven effectiveness?**

Actually, no. Our decades of experience in working with families, couples and individuals of all ages have resulted in a profession that helps people experiencing an enormous variety of difficulties. Family and Systemic Psychotherapists work in many different services and settings, including health, education and social care, private and public services, independent practice and voluntary sector services (see [How Do I Find Help](#) pages on [AFT's website](#) for further details).

We need to continue to use research findings to guide how we practice. Please see AFT's review of [The Evidence Base of Systemic Family and Couple Therapies](#) for an overview of the most recent contributions from research.

You may also wish to see AFT's information sheet on [Research for professionals](#).

\* Family therapists are not generally keen on attaching diagnoses to people unless there is a clear therapeutic value in doing so. Neither do we generally consider a difficulty to affect only one family member. However, we recognise that much current research describes problems by individual diagnostic labels.