

What is Psychoanalysis? Theory, Technique, History

All psychoanalytic theories share the assertion that something inside us, which is not fully in our awareness, can influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We call this the unconscious- a developmental and dynamic phenomenon. From here, we have access today to many theoretical conceptualizations of the mind, its development, and its integration with the body.

The fundamental techniques of free association and dream analysis are the foundation of psychoanalysis in practice. Therefore, interventions that do not allow the patient to free associate are not psychoanalytic interventions. They can be psychoanalytically informed by theory but use a different kind of technical approach. Differentiating between psychoanalytic technique and psychoanalytically informed techniques help the analyst or psychotherapist conceptualize and organize how to work with different patients. The link between the unconscious and free association is more direct- therefore it is a psychoanalytic technique. At times in the consulting room, the analyst becomes aware that the patient is unable to free associate. In those cases, other types of interventions may be more effective, either to prepare the patient for psychoanalysis or as a stand-alone treatment. Many modalities, such as Transference Focused Psychotherapy or Mentalization Based Therapies, show us the power of psychoanalytically informed interventions that move the patient away from a free-flowing state-of-mind to support mentalization or bring awareness to interpersonal patterns of relating. Understanding the technical difference between psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy can help the therapist think about how they are working with multiple types of patients in the consulting room.

Psychoanalysis as both a theory and a set of techniques is forged in its connection to time and place, and, therefore, must also be considered in a historical context. Psychoanalysis was born in the 1900s in a

Europe on the verge of World War I. As it has grown geographically with strong representation in Europe, South America, Central America, South Africa, Australia, and growing representation in China and other Asian countries, psychoanalysis (as a theory and technique) has been shaped, re-shaped, dropped, picked up, and questioned. What about psychoanalysis (and the unconscious) has been so divisive, challenging, and compelling over the years? For example, in the USA, university Psychology departments in the early 2000s often taught there was no unconscious and that dreams were just random electrical signals firing in the brain with no symbolic representation. Current neuroscience challenges that perspective, and the neuro-psychoanalytic research field has grown.

Lastly, the training model for psychoanalysts weaves together theory, affect, practice, and tuning the therapist through their own intensive work to address and continue working with the human condition. Psychoanalysis occurs at 4-5 times a week in a reclined position, and this frequency and position allows for the type of deep understanding that experientially teaches a new method of thinking.