

What's the Evidence?

Psychotherapy and the Frankish model for children and young people with learning disabilities

Key findings

- Psychotherapy aims to help people with a range of emotional and behavioural problems.
- The Frankish model is a form of psychotherapy specifically for people with disability. We did not find any guidance as to the severity of learning disability for which the therapy would be appropriate.
- There is poor quality evidence that psychotherapy can be effective for children and young people with learning disabilities and emotional or behavioural problems.
- There is little evidence to support the Frankish model as a specific form of disability psychotherapy. However this does not mean it is not effective, but that more research is needed to find out whether or not it is effective.

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What were we asked?

We were asked whether there was any evidence that the Frankish model of psychotherapy could help support the emotional and behavioural needs of children and young people with learning disabilities.

By learning disability we mean a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities that affects someone for their whole life. ¹

It is important to recognise there are a number of factors that may contribute to emotional or behavioural problems in a child or young person with a learning disability. Psychotherapy aims to address those issues which are psychological in origin. The Challenging Behaviour Foundation offers more information on other causes of behavioural issues. ²

What did we do?

We conducted a general Internet search to find out about the Frankish model of psychotherapy. We then searched NHS Evidence, The Cochrane Library, TRIP, NICE, and PubMed databases. Searches were conducted in July 2016. We looked for studies evaluating the effectiveness of this kind of psychotherapy for children and young people with learning disabilities.

We contacted Dr Pat Frankish, the founder of the Frankish model of psychotherapy to ask if there was any research we had not found. This 'What's the Evidence?' summary was also reviewed by an expert in the subject area as well as by members of our [Family Faculty](#).

What did we find?

What is psychotherapy?

- Psychotherapy provides a safe, confidential space for people to communicate difficult or painful feelings to a trained professional. Psychotherapy aims to help people with a range of emotional and behavioural problems. The therapy often involves talking, but can also use drama, art, play, or music.
- Psychotherapy can be short or long term. The number of sessions will depend on the person, the therapist, and the complexity of the person's difficulties.
- The British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists (BACP) hold a public record of therapists who have met their standards for registration. The BACP register is accredited by the Professionals Standard Authority for Health and Social Care.³ The UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) also hold a register of psychotherapists meeting certain standards and training requirements.⁴

What is the Frankish model of psychotherapy?

- The Frankish model of psychotherapy is a form of psychotherapy specific to people with any kind of disability. It is sometimes referred to as 'disability psychotherapy'. There are several different types of psychotherapy, the type used in the Frankish model is psychodynamic psychotherapy.
- Psychodynamic psychotherapists believe that past experiences and relationships determine current behaviour. This type of psychotherapy aims to explore the past as well as the present.⁵

- Disability psychodynamic psychotherapy (the Frankish model) focuses specifically on how to meet the emotional needs of people with a disability. In particular, the therapy is targeted at those with learning disabilities. This therapy looks at the impact that disability has on the person. Disability psychotherapies aim to reduce psychological distress, or emotional pain, which a person with learning disabilities may be experiencing.⁶ The Frankish model of psychotherapy is the first established form of disability psychotherapy.⁷
- We were unable to find any guidance as to the severity of learning disability for which the Frankish model of therapy would be appropriate.
- The Frankish model of therapy involves an initial 'Frankish Assessment'. This assessment aims to understand the stage of emotional development, or emotional age, of a person. A person's emotional age may be very different to their cognitive age. The emotional age and stage of development of a person informs the therapy they receive. Research suggests that the assessment tool can be applied by people from a variety of backgrounds, without any specific qualification.⁸
- The Frankish model is based on the idea that people have experienced some past traumatic event or events. An event is traumatic if it causes stress that overwhelms a person's capacity to cope. Feelings of terror, horror or helplessness are unable to be processed and result in the fight, flight or freeze response.

- Therapists believe that it is the storage, or freezing, of unresolved emotions triggered by external events that creates a long term negative impact.⁹

What does the evidence tell us?

Is there a need for psychotherapy in people with learning disabilities?

- There is evidence to show that people with learning disabilities are more likely to experience emotional or behavioural problems compared to the general population.¹⁰ This suggests that there may be a particular need for therapies such as psychotherapy for people with learning disabilities.
- A survey of mental health professionals (psychiatrists, psychotherapists and clinical psychologists) with a special interest in learning disability also supports the idea that psychotherapy is of importance to people with learning disabilities. The survey was carried out by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. 3800 questionnaires were distributed, and 424 professionals responded. The survey found that more than 4 out of every 5 professionals that responded believed there was a moderate or high demand for psychotherapy for people with learning disabilities.¹⁰ However, professionals passionate about learning disability psychotherapy may have been more likely to respond to the survey - this is known as response bias.
- The Royal College of Psychiatrists recommend that all people with a learning disability have access to psychotherapy services.¹⁰ It has been reported that people with a learning disability cannot always access appropriate therapy through mainstream mental health services.¹¹

- Although mainstream psychotherapy is not specific to people with learning disabilities, therapists are expected to adapt therapy to meet individuals' needs and abilities.¹²

Is there any evidence that psychotherapy can be helpful for people with a learning disability?

For various reasons, people with learning disabilities have traditionally been excluded from research evaluating psychotherapy. This means there are relatively few high quality studies of psychotherapy in people with learning disabilities.⁹

We identified a number of reviews of psychotherapy for people with a learning disability:

- A review in 2003 concluded that psychotherapy could be effective and beneficial for people with learning disabilities.¹³
- A more recent review published in 2011 also concluded that psychotherapy was likely to be effective for children and adolescents with learning disabilities. However the authors state that there was relatively little research, and the research that was available was not of high quality. Problems with quality included poorly designed studies and lack of detail on the treatments provided.¹⁴
- Another review published in 2012 concluded that there was a lack of studies exploring psychotherapy for adults with learning disabilities.¹⁵

- In 2014 a review was published looking specifically at psychodynamic psychotherapy (the form of psychotherapy used in the Frankish model). This review looked at studies of adults with learning disabilities, not children. The review concluded that psychodynamic psychotherapy could be useful for a range of problems including anger, aggression, and social withdrawal. However the authors note that the available research was not of a high quality. This was mainly due to poor study design and inadequate information on the treatment provided and the severity of clients' learning disability.¹⁶
- In 2016 another review was published with the same focus. This review offers further support for the finding that psychodynamic psychotherapy can be of benefit to adults with learning disabilities. However again the findings are limited by the quality of the research studies.¹⁷

NICE guidance for mental health problems in people with learning disabilities rated all studies of psychotherapy as very low quality. The list of specific psychological interventions recommended by NICE does not currently include psychotherapy.¹⁸

There have been two studies exploring the experiences of people with learning disabilities when using psychodynamic psychotherapy. Both studies found that participants had a generally positive experience of therapy and most felt that the therapy had made things better.^{19,20}

Is there any evidence that the Frankish model can be helpful for people with ID?

There has been little independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the Frankish model as a specific form of psychotherapy.

A paper published in 2015 describes a single case study of a 28 year old male with a mild learning disability who had received the Frankish model of psychotherapy. This case study reported a reduction in problem behaviours following the therapy. However, as this was a study of only one person the results must be interpreted cautiously.⁶

There has, to date, been no published evaluation on the use of Frankish Therapy for children or young people with learning disabilities.

What do we think?

- It is well recognised that people with learning disabilities are more likely to experience emotional or behavioural problems.
- There is poor quality evidence that psychotherapy can be effective for children and young people with learning disabilities and emotional or behavioural problems.
- Currently there is little evidence to support the Frankish model of therapy for people with learning disabilities.
- However this does not mean it is not effective, but that more research would be needed to find out whether or not it is effective compared to alternative options.

- Psychotherapy may not be suitable for everyone, so consultation with a GP or paediatrician is strongly recommended before seeking psychotherapy.
- Psychotherapy is likely to require a time commitment in order for any benefits to be realised.

Signposts to other information

Information about psychotherapy from the NHS:
www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Psychotherapy/Pages/Introduction.aspx

The Frankish model of therapy website:
www.frankishtraining.co.uk

The Challenging Behaviour Foundation:
www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk

We would like to hear your feedback on this summary – please email us at pencru@exeter.ac.uk if you have any comments or questions.

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Note: the views expressed here are those of the Peninsula Cerebra Research Unit (PenCRU) at the University of Exeter Medical School and do not represent the views of the Cerebra charity, or any other parties mentioned. We strongly recommend seeking medical advice before undertaking any treatments/therapies not prescribed within the NHS