I’m a Psychodynamic Therapist. Here’s What That Means.

Often, when I tell people I’m a therapist, they assume I offer practical advice or protocol-driven interventions, a view shaped partly by social media and contemporary mental health trends. Among Orthodox clinicians, I notice similar assumptions that guide how treatment is understood and practiced, reinforced by financial pressure toward structured interventions and by a culture that leans on teaching and immediate relief.

These perceptions can make what I do harder to appreciate. They also cause people to overlook the less-directive work of psychodynamic therapy, which fosters lasting insight and change and resonates with Jewish principles. Rather than offering direction, this approach invites a deepening curiosity about one’s emotional life, developing through discovery.

For decades as a rebbe and mentor in Yerushalayim, I worked within our community’s teaching culture to guide those in my care. Then, after graduate school, my clinical training introduced me to supportive, goal-oriented methods.

Now, as a psychodynamic practitioner, I sit with Orthodox men struggling to identify their feelings, unsure why sadness, shame, or loneliness persist despite lives rooted in mitzvos and community service. Through psychodynamic therapy, you can uncover patterns formed from earlier relational experiences, such as grief and withdrawal, and begin to change them, not by following advice but by following uncensored thought, unhurriedly.

Today, the word “therapist” is used in many contexts, typically describing a wide range of roles. Some practitioners act more like consultants, offering strategies based on predefined frameworks. Some social workers function like case managers, coordinating resources and addressing practical challenges. Trauma specialists can resemble coaches, emphasizing regulation techniques and helping people manage symptoms.

In my consulting room, I do not organize our work around diagnoses, teach skills, or dispense advice. Instead, I join you in considering how the mind thinks, relates, and repeats unconscious tendencies—like a chavrusa for the inner world who challenges assumptions without jumping to conclusions—toward a fuller sense of self and more informed, rewarding choices.

Diagnosis has its place, but today’s mental health culture, both in general and within our own community, tends to treat it as a full explanation of a person, and trauma as a full explanation of every difficulty. Some people come to describe themselves by that label alone, as though it were the whole story rather than a single chapter. A label can offer language and reassurance, but it can also obscure who you are. Psychodynamic therapy addresses anxiety, depression, addiction, or relational conflict, not by targeting individual symptoms, but by helping you understand what they mean and where they come from.

Understanding Psychodynamic Therapy

Developed from a century of studying unconscious thoughts and the crucial role of early experiences, psychodynamic therapy helps you understand yourself and connect more honestly with others through a respectful, collaborative process. Unlike more structured therapies, this approach is open-ended and based on the premise that much of our emotional experience happens outside conscious awareness. The mind regularly avoids what feels contradictory or threatening, yet these very thoughts and feelings reside in the unconscious, shaping how you relate and respond to the world.

Sensing what lies outside of awareness begins with speaking openly, without censoring. This is known as *free association*. The technique can feel counterintuitive at first, as the mind automatically filters speech. Speaking freely turns out to be not so simple, yet it is the very process required to bring hidden dynamics to light. I might notice the pause before a sentence changes direction, the moment a person catches themselves softening what was about to be said, before they notice it themselves.

With practice, patterns emerge in what is said, how it is said, and what is left unsaid, linked to emotional conflict or interpersonal struggles. By verbalizing what was previously unspoken, it becomes possible to loosen the grip these tendencies hold on behavior and relationships.

I also pay close attention to what unfolds in the connection with me. This is called *transference*. Old relational dynamics become activated in the consulting room, offering an opportunity for insight and repair. It is not uncommon to find yourself bracing for my disapproval before I have said a word, reenacting an older fear in the office with me.

When these dynamics arise, we examine them with curiosity, not judgment, creating conditions for flexible ways of relating that extend beyond our sessions.

Psychodynamic therapy is not about solving this or that but about making sense of who you are, how that came to be, and how relational tendencies repeat over time. This knowledge makes it possible to loosen the bonds of early experiences and create new life possibilities that are natural and sustainable.

I also invite conversation about dreams, not for theoretical interpretation but because they reveal what the waking mind conceals. Over time, this can bring a quiet understanding to feelings you could not otherwise name.

Boundaries and Informed Consent

Without boundaries and informed consent, there can be no therapy.

Other therapies use a frame too, but psychodynamic therapy uses it differently, as the space within which unspoken patterns can surface and be identified. The framework defines boundaries around time, location, structure, and purpose. A stable structure creates a space separate from everyday life, where unconscious dynamics can emerge and be worked through.

Meeting outside the office, exchanging texts, or extending sessions beyond the hour, though common in most other contexts, jeopardizes the treatment. Sharing details about my life, attending patient events, or discussing mutual acquaintances blurs the focus. Speaking with a shadchan, rabbi, parent, or spouse violates privacy and autonomy. Even guidance that feels reassuring in the moment can inhibit your own insight and capacity for growth.

Such guidelines do not impose distance or formal rules but create space for personal development. When familiar roles are suspended, you are welcome to bring your full, uncensored self into the room, allowing us to notice what naturally emerges. The frame keeps therapy focused on you.

Setting aside familiar reactions allows frustration, longing, doubt, fear, regret, and hostility to be expressed and examined instead of being suppressed. Without these boundaries, conversations fall into old patterns of avoiding uncertainty, seeking reassurance, or minimizing discomfort.

In Orthodox communities, boundaries can sometimes be porous, as family, neighbors, and rabbis are closely involved in a person's life. That makes the space psychodynamic therapy creates even more necessary.

Therapy is not something that happens to you. It is an alliance built on mutual respect and a clear sense of what the effort involves.

What Sessions Are Like

Initial sessions are conversational. I invite you to share what brought you to therapy and what you hope to accomplish. Together, we establish a shared appreciation of how therapy works and set realistic expectations for a productive working relationship.

Relief from anxiety, depression, or addiction may be the primary goal, but merely stating it repeatedly is not enough. Psychodynamic therapy asks for openness to what might hold a person back from feeling relaxed or satisfied, and to the origins of behavior or distress that remain hidden.

As sessions continue, the focus shifts to sharing what is on the mind, allowing thoughts to unfold and associations to arise. Instead of asking questions, I offer observations that invite reflection, avoiding the assumption that the answers to what is unknown are clear, or that the next topic is mine to decide.

During sessions, I pay attention not only to what is said but to how it is said and what is left out, noticing tone, rhythm, contradictions, repetitions, and shifts in mood. I reflect on these impressions, and within the bounds of confidentiality, discuss them with a senior supervisor to refine my thinking and stay closely attuned to the process.

This is not passive observation. Every nuance informs my exploration, helping me see patterns in your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and how early relationships continue to influence the way you relate to yourself and others.

My experiences as a rebbe and mentor inform how I recognize these and other patterns. That history sharpens my cultural awareness and sensitivity to what goes unsaid.

From Rebbe to Therapist

Having grown up seeking counsel from rebbeim, many may enter therapy expecting a similar kind of guidance. Likewise, some practitioners with Orthodox backgrounds may naturally adopt a more directive style, offering definitive answers or strategies for growth. This conflation of roles can inadvertently foster dependence on an outside authority and limit a patient's capacity for independent insight.

For me, transitioning to this work meant unlearning mentoring habits, not because guidance is wrong, but because therapy serves a different purpose. I learned to sit in silence when my natural impulse pulled me to offer a word of encouragement or advice. Therapy is not centered on teaching a person what to do, but on helping them express uncertainties. A rebbe cannot serve as a therapist for his talmidim, just as a clinician must not take on the role of teacher. The roles demand different boundaries, forms of attention, and types of trust.

I still believe some internal struggles can be addressed by rebbeim, and that Torah sources speak meaningfully about character refinement. My shift from rebbe to therapist has deepened my respect for inquiry. Now, instead of offering answers, I listen closely, speak sparingly, and trust that meaningful insight can unfold through candid exploration.

Supporting Students Abroad

As a rebbe, I regularly witnessed the challenge of external dependence. A year in Eretz Yisrael can be a meaningful time to learn Torah, build relationships, and move toward adulthood. Yet, away from family and familiar support, a student may face emotional challenges or develop behavioral symptoms for the first time.

Rebbeim and teachers often respond by advising or referring students to therapists focused on trauma or crisis management. Collaboration with therapists can sound promising, but outside expectations can shift the focus from personal exploration to meeting external standards. This dynamic can reinforce an identity of brokenness or fragility. A therapist, like a rebbe or teacher, can become another authority offering solutions rather than helping students hear their own voice.

Psychodynamic therapy works differently. Its focus is not on managing symptoms, but on understanding the meaning behind them. Through open exploration, students uncover unseen forces shaping their experience and develop a more integrated sense of self. While underlying patterns are explored, symptoms can be addressed indirectly, with relief coming as the patterns shift.

The work of psychodynamic therapy depends on curiosity more than certainty. This commitment to uncertainty is especially important when you and I share an Orthodox identity, where our common language and experiences can make it tempting to assume we already understand one another.

Religion in the Therapy Room

As an Orthodox therapist working with Orthodox men, I often hear the assumption that our shared background makes therapy easier. The reality is more nuanced. Familiarity can foster comfort, but it also shapes what happens between us, and that becomes part of what we examine together. It is natural to hesitate, wondering if I might judge you, assuming I share your outlook, or hoping for my validation. These dynamics are subtle but essential to recognize.

Psychodynamic therapy does not promote a particular worldview or offer religiously rooted recommendations. It draws on a clinical tradition of listening, noticing, and considering, from a position known as *therapeutic neutrality.* I am not there to steer a patient’s religious life in any direction, only to help clarify their emotional one. In the therapy room, I am present as a professional, receptive to your experience and committed to honoring your individuality and subjectivity.

Still, my yarmulke and beard are part of what is noticed first, along with other details of my appearance and the setting that activate associations immediately. Consciously and unconsciously, the mind forms a narrative about who I am and how safe you might feel with me. Identifying these assumptions becomes part of our work. We attend not only to what is said but also to what lingers in the space between us.

Psychodynamic therapy encourages attention to impulses and desires that may be difficult to disclose, including those beyond halacha or communal norms. Acknowledging these thoughts does not mean endorsing them, but it allows us to consider where they come from and what they carry. That kind of curiosity can be unsettling, and it is frequently where insight begins and change gently takes root.

The Question of Time

"How long will therapy take?" is difficult to answer. Still, few ask how long it takes to grow up or to build trust. Therapy is a process that develops at its own pace. The open-ended nature of psychodynamic therapy can seem impractical, especially when time, money, or urgency are factors. Yet the slower pace of this therapy is precisely what allows it to work.

Research shows meaningful change often begins within six months and deepens through recognizing desires, questioning assumptions, and engaging with avoided emotions. These changes do not happen on demand. They occur only when one becomes steady enough to speak with less hesitation and attend closely to inner feelings and thoughts.

While this therapy typically requires a longer initial commitment, its value extends beyond the end of therapy. What is gained stays with a person, becoming a way of self-knowing that shapes their recognition of emotions, relationships, and the choices made.

So the real question may not be, "How long will this take?" but, "What change am I hoping for?" If your goal is to get through a crisis or learn a specific skill, shorter-term approaches may be appropriate. But if your aim is to better appreciate how you operate in the world and why, then it may be worth giving time to a therapy that makes this possible.

Why You Should Consider This Therapy

You may have tried therapy and concluded it did not work. But saying "therapy did not work" is like saying you read a book you did not like. Every therapist and every therapy is different. Every relationship is unique.

While psychodynamic therapy may not seem popular or widely understood, it is deeply researched and proven highly effective for chronic, habitual struggles. It is also a profoundly compassionate approach that creates a setting where a person is respected and invited into sustained relational engagement, rather than offered simple comfort or solutions. Unlike treatments focusing primarily on managing distress, psychodynamic therapy encourages vulnerable expression of emotion. That kind of exposure can feel risky, which may explain why this approach is less widely embraced.

For many, psychodynamic therapy opens a door to an awareness that cannot be found anywhere else, one that gradually changes how you see yourself and the people around you. Not everyone is ready for that kind of exploration, but for those who are, it can lead to significant, lasting change. To only try what is popular is to risk missing out on a meaningful experience that requires time and trust, and offers something profound in return.