***What is Psychoanalysis?***

Psychoanalysis is one method by which trained psychologists or psychotherapists attempt to get at the root cause(s) of a patient's current behavior or actions. This is usually done through a number of sessions in which the patient recalls specific memories of life-altering events -- a process known as free association. Practitioners of psychoanalysis hope to use this information along with other observations to formulate a possible course of treatment for certain mental illnesses or other self-limiting neuroses or irrational fears.

Before the eminent Austrian psychologist Dr. Sigmund Freud developed psychoanalysis in the late 19th century, there were many theories but little scientific knowledge about the inner workings of the human mind. People were believed to behave the way the did for numerous reasons: the will of the gods, demonic possession, inherent good or evil from birth, imbalance of 'humours' and so forth. Criminals who committed crimes against society or those who demonstrated bizarre behaviors were simply removed from society, with little hope for meaningful [rehabilitation](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-rehabilitation.htm).

Dr. Freud determined that many current behaviors and actions are actually triggered by earlier traumas to the psyche. Freud hypothesized that the human mind was much more complex than previously assumed, and it was this complexity that drove many people to form socially unacceptable thoughts or make dangerous decisions. Freudian psychoanalysis in its original form concentrated heavily on the patient's repressed sexual fantasies and early childhood experiences. Freud hoped to help his patients confront traumatic memories in a safe environment in order to understand their current difficulties.

Since the time of Freud, psychoanalysis has undergone some changes. Modern practitioners tend to find the 'talking cure' aspect of Freud's methods to be the most useful tool, while avoiding the overuse of psychosexual [trauma](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-trauma.htm) experiences for diagnosis. During present day psychoanalysis sessions, patients discuss their innermost thoughts and experiences with a trained psychotherapist. The therapist's role is to guide the conversation towards specific conflicts of thought.

If the patient himself can recall a painful experience and apply that memory to a current situation, he could possibly 'cure' himself over time. For example, if someone suffering from severe social anxiety could remember a particularly humiliating incident from elementary school, this might help him or her to put present day events in perspective. Successfully addressing a repressed thought or fantasy can end a conflict between the mind and body.

Freud's most famous psychoanalysis model divided the human mind into three separate elements -- the id, the ego and the superego. The id is the primitive driving force behind our basest needs, such as sexual satisfaction and social advancement. The superego is packed with all the moral codes imprinted on us since birth. The ego is our waking mind which motivates us to make decisions based on our specific drives and needs. Because the superego and the id are constantly in conflict, many people are driven to psychoanalysis by an overworked ego struggling to make sense of the world around it. Using this psychoanalysis model, criminal behavior occurs when the id becomes too dominant and ultra-rigid moral behavior is triggered by an unchecked superego.

Many modern psychotherapists have embraced a different psychoanalysis model based on the idea of conflict. All of us have a moral code which determines the rightness or wrongness of a particular act. By the same token, our bodies have needs of their own which are not easily controlled by rational thought alone.

A married man may meet an attractive woman at work, for example. He may understand that pursuing an illicit relationship would be morally wrong, but he still feels the physical effects of a sexual attraction. Even if he retreats from the encounter and nothing physical occurs, the conflict between mind and body may still exist. Over time, all of these conflicts can overwhelm the human psyche, creating the need to safely vent those feelings and repressed fantasies. Psychoanalysis strives to provide a directed form of venting which should ultimately reduce the level of conflict between fantasy and reality.