

Other things that you may need to think about

Many young people include parents, carers or other family members in the whole formulation process – they may remember or have noticed important things that you would not have thought of.

It could be that your family and friends have noticed changes in you and feel worried. You may want to explain to them that you will talk to them when you're ready.

What to do if you don't feel like it's helping...

If you feel comfortable, tell your clinical psychologist. They will be interested in your feedback so that they can make any necessary changes. Alternatively, you could:

- ask a family member or friend to discuss on your behalf;
- contact a local service user participation group.



The British Psychological Society

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The British
Psychological Society

Division of
Clinical Psychology

Working with a psychologist

Understanding formulation for young people

Working with a clinical psychologist can help you to:

- Understand the good reasons why you feel the way you do.
- Make sense of your experiences.
- Decide what changes you want in your life.



What is formulation?

A **formulation** is just a way of describing problems and ways out of them. It's a joint effort between you and a psychologist to try to understand the good reasons why you are struggling, distressed or feeling stuck.

These good reasons may include:

- past difficulties and experiences that have affected you;
- changes in relationships in your family and friends;
- people having left, become ill or died;
- conflict at home, at school or with your friends;
- difficult changes in life (e.g. starting a new school).

Working out how different aspects of life fit together can help you begin to make sense of why you are having difficulties.

A good formulation also:

- recognises the positive things, for example, your own strengths and resources and people you can call on to help;
- points the way forward to positive change.

There is quite a bit of evidence that making sense of your difficulties in this way can be helpful.

The formulation process

Working on a formulation is like two people putting together a jigsaw. The pieces of the 'jigsaw' are pieces of information, like:

- how you feel at the moment;
- what's going on in your life now;
- what's going on with family, friends and school;
- when the difficulties or distress started;
- key experiences and relationships in your life;
- what these experiences and relationships mean to you.

An example

Amy described to the psychologist how she was feeling sad and was worrying about her mum. The psychologist asked Amy about how life is now, about her past and about how she saw herself. They worked out that these problems began soon after Amy started year 7. One teacher had been very critical of Amy in front of the rest of the class. Girls in her class had started teasing her about it, and this had got steadily worse and become bullying.

Amy's mum had been ill a lot during her first few years in primary school, and she was cared for by her grandmother who could also be very critical of her. The teacher's behaviour reminded her of these feelings, and of how worried she was when her mum was ill. The bullying made this worse.

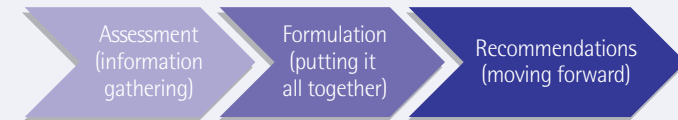
The psychologist spoke about how and why these experiences affected Amy. She also paid attention to Amy's strengths, such as her care for her mother. Amy and the psychologist then agreed a formulation of why she was feeling as she was. They were then able to talk about things that were likely to be helpful to her.



Like with a jigsaw, how long it takes to complete a formulation depends on how many pieces there are and how complicated the 'picture' is. Once the pieces are put together, the formulation can be used to explore the best way forward.

Psychologists are trained to do this, but you are the expert on your life, so their understanding needs to be combined with your knowledge about your own life and experiences.

The whole process looks a bit like this:



What happens next?

Sometimes having a formulation:

- can be all the help you need. This is because understanding your difficulties helps you change how you think about them and also how you deal with them;
- suggests that having therapy would help you.

Because some problems can be complicated and hard to deal with, finding solutions may take time. It might be difficult for you and your loved ones to look at some of your life experiences and make changes to achieve your goals. Psychologists are trained to recognise this and to support you, but it is also important for you to take an active part.

You and the psychologist will return to the formulation and review it over time. The psychologist will try to ensure that it makes sense to you, but it's important that you tell them whether it fits for you. Only you can be the judge of this, because you are the expert on your own life and experiences.