

healthsmart!

Choosing a Mental Health Professional

Mental illness is a health condition that affects thinking, mood or behavior and can keep you from accomplishing the tasks of daily living. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that as many as 26 percent of American adults, nearly 58 million, suffer from mental illness, and an estimated one in 10 children suffers from mental illness severe enough to cause some level of impairment.

Do I need professional help?

Mental illness can come in many forms so it can be difficult to determine if you or a family member needs professional help. Worry, stress and sadness are common in everyone, but with a mental illness, these feelings do not go away and can interfere with your life. Common types of mental health illnesses that require the help of a mental health professional include excessive anxiety, prolonged depression and substance abuse. A good place to start if you believe you or a family member needs help is your primary care physician. He or she can help determine which health care professional can further diagnose and treat symptoms believed to be related to mental health.

Signs and symptoms of mental illness

Be sure to talk with your physician if you or a loved one is experiencing any of the following, as they could be symptoms of mental illness:

- Significant decline in work performance, poor work attendance and/or lack of productivity
- Social withdrawal from activities, friends, family
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Sleep disturbances, such as persistent nightmares, insomnia, hypersomnia (excessive sleepiness) and flashbacks
- Prolonged depression
- Appetite changes causing significant weight gain or loss
- Continuous or frequent aggression
- Continuous or frequent anger for periods longer than six months
- Excessive worry and/or anxiety
- Threats to self or others
- Thoughts of death and or suicide
- Destructive behaviors, such as criminal activity
- Sudden feelings of panic, dizziness, increased heartbeat
- Increased feelings of guilt, helplessness and/or hopelessness

Types of mental health professionals

There are many varieties of mental health professionals. Who you will need to see will depend on several factors such as the severity of your symptoms, your medication needs and your health insurance coverage.

- Psychiatrist – A physician with a doctor of medicine (MD) degree or a doctor of osteopathic medicine (DO) degree, with at least four years of specialized training in psychiatry. Psychiatrists provide medical and psychiatric evaluations, treat psychiatric disorders and provide psychotherapy. Psychiatrists are able to treat illnesses through prescribing and monitoring medications.

- **Psychologist** – Typically have a doctoral degree (PhD or PsyD) in clinical, educational, counseling or research psychology. Psychologists receive specific training in diagnosis, psychological assessment, a wide variety of psychotherapies and research. Psychologists provide psychological testing and evaluations, treat emotional and behavioral problems and mental disorders, and provide psychotherapy. Psychologists provide help for a range of issues, from marriage problems to personality disorders.
- **Social worker** – Most social workers involved in mental health care hold a master's degree in social work (MSW). Licensed clinical social workers (LCSW) may provide therapy in private practice, psychiatric facilities, hospitals and community agencies. Others may work in employee assistance programs or as case managers who coordinate psychiatric, medical and other services on your behalf. They may specialize in certain areas, such as domestic violence or chronic illness.
- **Psychiatric nurse** - Licensed registered nurses (RN) who have extra training in mental health. They offer a variety of services depending on their level of training and experience. Under the supervision of medical doctors, they may offer mental health assessments and psychotherapy and help manage your medications.
- **Advanced practice registered nurses (APRN)** – APRNs hold a master's degree in psychiatric-mental health nursing. They typically diagnose and treat mental illnesses and may be qualified to practice without the supervision of a doctor. They are typically licensed to prescribe and monitor medication for treatment.
- **Mental health counselor** – These professionals typically hold a master's degree in social work or a related field, have several years of supervised work experience, and are licensed or certified as counselors. Counselors may specialize in various areas, such as grief counseling, marriage issues or substance abuse. They may work in private practice, community agencies, hospitals and employee assistance programs and other settings.
- **Marriage and family therapists** – These therapists typically have a master's or

doctoral degree and evaluate and treat disorders related to the family. Sessions can be conducted one-on-one or in a family group. Marriage and family therapists specialize in a wide variety of problems, including depression, family conflicts and eating disorders.

- **Pastoral counselors** – Pastoral counselors are trained mental health providers who also have in depth religious or theological training and provide treatment within a spiritual context. Pastoral counselors may provide treatment of mental illnesses, spiritual direction, group therapy and family therapy. They may work in pastoral counseling centers, schools, religious communities or other settings.

Special needs for children

If you are concerned about your child's behavior and believe it is due to a mental illness, you may want to consult with teachers, guidance counselors or other adults who may have further detailed information about your child's behavior. If you remain concerned, this information should be shared with your family physician.

Symptoms of a child's or adolescent's need for a mental health professional include:

- Falling off in school performance
- Severe worry or anxiety; regular refusal to go to school, go to sleep or take part in activities that are normal for the child's age
- Hyperactivity; fidgeting; constant movement beyond regular playing
- Persistent nightmares
- Persistent disobedience or aggression (longer than six months)
- Frequent, unexplainable temper tantrums
- Marked changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Depression; prolonged negative mood and attitude, often accompanied by poor appetite; difficulty sleeping or thoughts of death
- Abuse of alcohol and/or drugs
- Intense fear of becoming obese with no relationship to actual body weight; purging food or restricting eating
- Threats of self-harm or harm to others
- Self-injury or self-destructive behavior
- Frequent outbursts of anger, aggression
- Threats to run away

In addition to the specialists previously outlined who may specialize in working with children, a child and adolescent psychiatrist is a licensed physician (MD or DO) who is a fully trained psychiatrist and who has two additional years of advanced training with children, adolescents and families.

Questions to ask when choosing a mental health professional

- What personal preferences do you have for a health care professional? (For instance, you may prefer working with someone of a specific gender or age.)
- What are the professional's qualifications, experience and training?
- What kind of license does he/she have?
- What experience does the professional have in treating your type of problem?
- What is the professional's treatment approach for your specific illness?
- How long will treatment last?
- What types of insurance are accepted and how much will your out-of-pocket expense be?

Do I need to seek care in a hospital?

Intensive hospital inpatient programs typically treat schizophrenia, chronic mental illness and extreme emotional problems such as prolonged depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol abuse, and critical situations. Hospitalization typically provides patients with an evaluation from a team of mental health professionals and a course of therapy. This care is often followed up with outpatient treatment. Your family physician or current health care professional can help you determine whether inpatient care is right for you.

Emergency psychiatric care

Emergency medical care for individuals with mental health emergencies is widely available. If you have considered physically hurting yourself or others, or know someone who is at risk of doing so:

- Call your doctor's office.
- Call 911 for emergency services.
- Go to the emergency room of the nearest hospital.
- Ask a family member or friend to take you to the hospital or to call your doctor for you.
- Call the toll-free, 24-hour National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

Paying for mental health services

Fees for mental health care vary considerably among the professions and types of services required. If you are without insurance, Medicare or Social Security, ask your physician to recommend a reduced-cost service. Services are available that scale their fees based on the patient's ability to pay.

- **Insurance.** If you have health insurance, review your policy and contact your provider to find out what services are covered. Many insurance plans and health maintenance organizations (HMOs) may provide mental health benefits but limit your choice of provider and services. HMOs usually require a referral from your primary care physician. Employee counseling services may be available to you through your workplace for free or at a reduced rate. If you feel comfortable doing so, check with your human resources office.
- **Medicare.** The national health insurance program for people over 65 and for younger workers who have become totally disabled, Medicare does offer limited coverage for mental health treatment. Call Medicare at 1-800-MEDICARE for complete information about your eligibility and coverage.
- **Social Security.** Benefits may apply to people suffering from disabling mental health illnesses. You must first qualify for these benefits by submitting an application. For further inquiry, call the Social Security Administration office at 1-800-772-1213.

Additional resources

UK HealthCare

UK HealthCare provides a full range of clinical psychiatric services for children and adults. An inpatient unit is housed at UK Good Samaritan Hospital and an outpatient clinic is located at Blazer Parkway. Specialized emergency care is available at UK Good Samaritan Hospital. For more information about mental health illnesses, visit ukhealthcare.uky.edu or to schedule an appointment, call **859-323-6021**.

National Institute of Mental Health

Information about specific illnesses, fact sheets, research publications and statistics.

5600 Fishers Lane, Room 7C-02
Rockville MD 20857
301-443-4513

www.nimh.nih.gov

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

Offers support group information, mental illness explanations and community events.

Colonial Place Three
2107 Wilson Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington VA 22201-3042
1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

www.nami.org

Mental Health America (formerly National Mental Health Association)

Offers fact sheets on mental illnesses, informational brochures and a crisis line.

2000 N. Beauregard St., 6th Floor
Alexandria VA 22311
1-800-969-6642
Crisis line: 1-800-273-TALK or 1-800-273-8255

www.mentalhealthamerica.net

American Psychiatric Association

Offers consumer Web site and research and information about psychiatry practices.

1000 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 1825
Arlington VA 22209
1-888-35-PSYCH or 1-888-357-7924

www.psych.org

American Psychological Association

Offers information on finding a psychologist along with information on topics related to psychological health.

750 First St., NE
Washington DC 20002-4242
1-800-374-2721 or 202-336-5500

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)

Offers information on child psychiatric disorders along with facts, videos and research.

3615 Wisconsin Ave., N.W.
Washington DC 20016-3007
202-966-7300

www.aacap.org

Kentucky Department for Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services

For more information about admission, care, treatment, release and patient follow-up in public or private psychiatric residential facilities.

Cabinet for Human Resources
100 Fair Oaks Lane
Frankfort KY 40621-0001
502-564-4527

<http://mhmr.ky.gov/kdmhmr>

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Call UK Health Connection at (859) 257-1000 or toll free (800) 333-8874 to make an appointment or request a referral. Visit us online at www.ukhealthcare.uky.edu.

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