



Choosing a mental health provider: How to find one who suits your needs

Seeking mental health treatment can be a big decision. But acknowledging your need for treatment is only the first step. You must also find a doctor or therapist to see.

If you've never consulted a mental health provider before, you may not know where to begin. Here's how to find a mental health provider, along with questions and issues to consider as you decide whether a particular provider suits your style and needs.

Which type of mental health provider is right for you?

You may not realize just how many types of mental health providers are available until you start looking for one. Should you see a family practice doctor? A psychiatrist? Psychologist? Social worker? Does it matter?

Several considerations can help guide your decision:

- The severity of your symptoms
- Your medication needs
- The provider's level of competence and expertise
- Your health insurance coverage

If your symptoms are severe and you may need medication to control them, you may want to first consult a psychiatrist, who can prescribe medications. Although your family doctor can also prescribe medications, a psychiatrist may be more familiar with the wide range of psychiatric medications, how to use them in combination, and how to manage their side effects.

If you're facing conflicts with your teenagers or your marriage is rocky, you may instead want to consult a marriage and family therapist. Or you may want to see both a psychologist to talk about your problems and a psychiatrist to manage your medications.

On the other hand, you may not have a choice. Your health insurance may dictate who you can visit. Your insurance company or Medicare or Medicaid can tell you what types of mental health providers it provides coverage for and what your benefit limits are, such as how many visits you're allowed. Some insurance plans, for instance, authorize more visits to a nurse, social worker or psychologist than to a psychiatrist, whose fees are usually higher.

Finding a mental health provider

Finding a mental health provider takes some legwork. If it seems like more time and energy than you can muster — especially if you're facing depression or another serious mental illness — consider enlisting help from your primary care

doctor, family or friends.

Here are some ways to find mental health providers:

- Seek a referral or recommendation from your other health care providers, such as a family doctor, gynecologist or pediatrician.
- Ask trusted friends, family or clergy.
- Check phone book listings under such categories as community service numbers, counselors, physicians, psychologists or social services organizations.
- Ask your health insurance company for a list of providers.
- Ask your company's employee assistance program for a referral.
- Contact a local or national mental health organization or medical society.
- Use a referral service from a national professional association for doctors or therapists.

Don't discount your personal preferences

Your legwork doesn't stop with the referral. Before scheduling your first appointment, think about whether you have preferences or needs regarding:

- Gender
- Age
- Religion
- Language
- Cultural background

Don't feel bad about ruling out someone based on these criteria. Your comfort level is important since you may be establishing a long-term relationship. Even tone of voice or appearance may matter to you. Although you usually won't know how a mental health provider looks ahead of time, some clinics, organizations or associations post pictures and biographies online.

Questions to ask a mental health provider

Once you've found a few mental health providers who seem like they may suit you, it's time to call and ask a few more questions. In some cases, a receptionist may be able to answer the bulk of your questions. Some mental health providers are in private practice, though, and don't have a receptionist. In that case, you may be able to ask some questions on the phone, or they may ask you to come in for an initial session.

Here are some issues to consider asking about, either on the phone or at your first appointment:

- Their education, training, licensure and years in practice. Licensing requirements can vary widely by state. You can double-check credentials by contacting your state's licensing boards.
- Office hours, fees, length of sessions and which insurance providers they work with, or if they work with Medicare or Medicaid.

- Their treatment approach and philosophy, to make sure it suits your style and needs.
- Specialization. Mental health providers often specialize in certain disorders or age groups. Some, for instance, work only with adolescents. Others specialize in eating disorders or substance abuse.

Don't hesitate to ask lots of questions of a potential provider. Finding the right match is crucial to establishing rapport and making sure you're getting the best treatment.

Periodically reassess your rapport with your mental health provider

If you don't feel comfortable after the first visit, talk about your concerns at your next session or consider finding a new mental health provider. As time goes by, periodically re-evaluate how you feel and whether your needs are being met. Don't feel compelled to stay with a provider if you're not comfortable.

Although the process of choosing a mental health provider and the treatment itself can be hard work or downright painful, it can also be rewarding. You may resolve long-standing conflicts, overcome personal challenges and ultimately enjoy your life more.