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Making up your mind: what to ask when seeking therapy

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You feel helpless and sad. Overwhelmed. Your job isn't going well, nor is your marriage. Despite your best efforts, you can't seem to feel better. So what do you do?

Family and friends have done everything they can, but even they conclude it's time you saw an expert. The question is: Who?

It's one thing to find a doctor when your throat is sore or your back hurts or your fever jumps to 102. It's quite another to find the right person to help with emotional problems - a stranger, even, with whom you can share your innermost secrets.

How do you find such a person? Where do you begin? Dr. Russ Newman, executive director for professional practices at the American Psychological Association, or APA, says finding the mental-health practitioner best suited to you is much tougher than finding the right physician.

"And the reason it's tougher is that most people don't grow up knowing what a therapist or a psychologist or a psychiatrist is," he says, "whereas they do grow up knowing what a family physician is. You have a picture in your head based on experiences you've had, but most people haven't had the same experiences, or the same picture, when it comes to psychotherapy."

So, how do you develop the picture?

Common sense suggests you start with credentials. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor with more training than a clinical psychologist (who usually has a Ph.D.), or a marriage and family therapist, a licensed clinical social worker, or a licensed professional counselor.

But does that mean a psychiatrist is right for you, simply because he or she has loftier credentials than the clinical psychologist your sister or your best friend raves about?

The short answer - no.

"If you're dealing with problems in your life, or your marriage isn't going well, or you can't get along with authority figures at work, and you just want to talk to somebody, psychotherapy or counseling is probably the best option," says Dr. David Tyler, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School. "But there's a lot of different flavors of that."

He contends that in today's mental-health environment, "a lot of folks who aren't shrinks can do just as good a job as psychiatrists - and may be a lot cheaper. I'm talking clinical psychologists or social workers, who, if they've had the proper training, can do a tremendous amount of good."

So what are the differences you need to consider in looking for your therapist?

Psychiatrists: They complete a four-year medical program, just as a surgeon or any other doctor, followed by a residency and a psychiatric internship that usually lasts at least four more years.

"Let's say your husband isn't sleeping or is openly talking suicide," says Tyler. "Well, then, he needs to see someone who has the ability to prescribe medication. That would be a psychiatrist."

Tyler, who doubles as vice chairman for clinical services at the medical school, agrees that finding the therapist who's right for you can be a big problem and one that gets scant attention in today's medical landscape.

Most psychiatrists are trained not only in psychotherapy and talk therapy but also in prescribing a wide range of psychotropic medications, such as anti-anxiety and anti-psychotic drugs, which help alleviate emotional or mental problems.

Clinical psychologists: They are required to complete a doctoral program in psychology or clinical psychology. A psychologist obtains a bachelor's degree, then begins a doctoral program that lasts about five years. Psychologists offer psychotherapy or talk therapy, but many also have advanced training in research methods and testing, which provide additional insight into brain functioning and-or learning disabilities.

With any therapist, Newman suggests you start with licensing. "You can't call yourself a psychologist unless you have a license to practice in that state."

Beyond that, the APA suggests asking, "How many years have you practiced psychology?" If you suffer from a specific issue (for example, anxiety, depression, eating or sleeping disorders), you should ask what experience the therapist has in dealing with such problems.

Licensed marriage and family therapists, known also as MFTs or LMFTs: At a minimum, most have a master's degree in psychology, clinical psychology, counseling psychology or marriage and family therapy.

Mary Ellen Durham, a licensed clinical social worker and a licensed marriage and family therapist, shares a private practice in Dallas with a clinical psychologist and a psychiatrist, to whom she frequently makes in-house referrals. The three have shared such a relationship for 20 years.

"We try to cover the waterfront," she says.

In her own work, she defines a marriage and family therapist as someone skilled in helping a patient navigate his or her relationships, with relationships being the key word.

"Anyone who comes into therapy," says Durham, "is having relationship difficulties, whether with a family member, or a spouse, or a child, or a co-worker in the workplace, or a friend. These can be situational or emotional. We try to address what's going on currently, then go back - to the family of origin or previous relationship differences that need to be explored and resolved. But the immediate need is to get this person, or this couple, or this family, functional again."

Licensed professional counselors: Licensed professional counselors, or LPCs as they're known in the business, provide a valuable service to clients in need of help.

Cathy Woodyard, a licensed professional counselor with a private practice in McKinney, Texas, describes the categories this way: As doctors, psychiatrists are the ones to go to for any problem requiring medication; marriage and family therapists focus on working "with families and couples"; licensed clinical social workers "focus on helping folks find the resources they need," she says. "They're far more informed than we are on government programs, housing and food."

An LPC's training "is more heavily focused on counseling, learning counseling skills and relationship skills," she says. "We're very different from psychologists, who tend to deal with more serious mental illnesses, though many of them do provide therapy or talk therapy as well. Counselors have a focus on wellness and normal human development."

Licensed clinical social worker: Most have a minimum of a master's degree and are skilled in matching individuals and families with social services. They most often work in hospitals, clinics and agencies but may also work as therapists in private practice.

The APA suggests that, regardless of whom you pick, questions are imperative and you might even request an initial interview. Suggested queries:

_What are your areas of expertise?

_What kinds of treatments do you use?

_What are your fees?

_What types of insurance do you accept?

_Are you affiliated with any managed-care organization?

_Do you accept Medicare or Medicaid?

In his guidebook, "How to Choose a Good Doctor," Dr. George D. LeMaitre says board certification is a "minimum standard" for choosing a health-care professional. But he warns against putting too much stock in other credentials, such as Ivy League degrees or a floor-to-ceiling wall full of awards.

"No amount of documentation with medical credentials says a thing about professional excellence," writes LeMaitre. "You just cannot measure the quality of human service by quantitative means."

Initially, the search for the right therapist is going to feel daunting. So where might you turn to make it easier?

Word of mouth: Do the obvious. Turn first to friends and family members, who may be able to suggest a therapist who worked wonders for them. But beware: Just because Dr. Feelgood worked blissfully for them doesn't mean he'll be worth a hoot for you.

Your insurance provider: Most company health plans offer a mental-health option, albeit one that won't be as good as coverage for simple medical care. Typically, most provide a list of in-network providers who require a co-payment. Should you choose to go "out of network," you'll pay more. Many doctors follow a sliding-scale formula based on the patient's ability to pay. Resolve all payment issues before you begin.

Referrals from other health-care professionals: Dr. Gregory Graves, the medical director for Dallas Metrocare Services, recommends starting with your family physician, who he believes should even conduct your initial evaluation.

Professional organizations: The American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association are just two of the agencies that can steer you in the right direction.

When you're close to picking someone, how do you check for warning signs? You could query the aforementioned organizations to see whether the person you're considering has had a complaint filed against him or her. More Internet-savvy consumers may even be able to search court records.

In the case of psychiatrists, it's a bit easier, though hardly foolproof. Tyler recommends turning to the Web site of your state's board of medical examiners. That way, you can see whether any medical doctor (psychiatrist or otherwise) has incurred a complaint, has ever lost his or her license, etc. Civil suits and criminal activity are also listed. But, he says, it's only a start. Your own good sense will always be your best guide.

"If you sit down and somebody makes you feel terrible, or they're arrogant or abusive, hey, just leave," says Tyler.

In most cases, the person you select should be able to help you. In a recent study by the Stanford University School of Medicine, psychotherapy was found to be remarkably

effective in decreasing patients' depression, anxiety and related symptoms such as pain, fatigue and nausea. The study showed that 50 percent of patients noticeably improved after eight sessions, while 75 percent of individuals in therapy improved by the end of six months.

But as the American Psychological Association says, finding "the right match" will do the most, by far, to ensure the best results.

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