

Mental health services



Finding mental health services is important — whether your concern is for your own well-being or the well-being of another person. Here are some tips to help prepare and guide you on how to talk to health care providers about mental health issues.

Talk to a primary care provider first

You are probably seeing your primary care provider about other aspects of your health, so remember to bring up your mental health concerns. Mental health is an integral part of overall health. In many primary care settings, it is now common to ask if you are feeling stressed, anxious or depressed or if you have had thoughts of suicide. Don't wait for your health care provider to ask about your mental health. Start the conversation.

Because symptoms of mental health problems can be related to interactions between medications you are taking for other conditions, be prepared to tell your primary care provider all of the medications you are taking, including over-the-counter drugs, herbs, vitamins and supplements. Take along a log similar to the one below to your appointment. Also, let your health care provider know about your family history. Mental health conditions can run in families.

Action: Keep a medications log¹

Name of drug, herb or supplement	What it is for	Date started	Health care provider who prescribed it	Color and shape	Dose and instructions

Find a mental health professional

Your primary care provider can refer you to a mental health specialist if needed. Here are a few questions you might want to think about or ask when looking for a mental health professional:²

- Do you feel comfortable with this person?
- How much education and professional experience does this person have?
- Has this person worked with people similar to you (including people from your cultural background, if that is important to you)? For how long?
- How will you work together to establish goals and evaluate your progress?
- How often will you meet together? Can you call on the phone or email between appointments?
- What kinds of improvement can you expect to see?

Remember that you are looking for someone who can help you with your treatment long term. Finding someone who listens to your concerns, takes your perspective into consideration and works with you to improve your sense of well-being is the goal.

Receive a diagnosis and a treatment plan²

Unlike diabetes or cancer, there is no medical test that can accurately diagnose mental illness. In the United States, mental health professionals use the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association, to assess symptoms and make a diagnosis. The manual lists criteria including feelings and behaviors and time limits in order to be officially classified as a mental health condition.

After the diagnosis is made, a health care provider can help develop a treatment plan that could include medication, counseling or therapy, lifestyle changes, education and social support. Treatments for mental illness vary by diagnosis and by person. There is no “one size fits all” treatment.

Ask about the cost of services

Affordable strategies and interventions exist to treat most mental illnesses. It is reasonable and expected to inquire about the likely length and cost of any treatment that is prescribed. Ask if your health plan covers the costs. If you do not have insurance, ask about the location and services of the nearest community health center.

If your employer provides an employee assistance program (EAP), it could also be a resource for you. EAPs provide assessments and services addressing a range of personal concerns that interfere with employees’ well-being and work performance, including emotional and substance use issues, interpersonal relationships, legal problems and financial difficulties. EAP services are typically provided at no cost to the employee, although the number of sessions may be limited. Services may be provided in person, by telephone or through information technology media.³



What can you do?

Make a list of the questions or concerns that you’d like to discuss with any health care provider or mental health professional that you may visit.

Sources:

1. National Institute on Aging. Tracking Your Medications, 2019.
2. National Institute of Mental Health. Help for Mental Illnesses, 2019.
3. National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Population Health. Support for Employees, 2021.

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