

Mental Health Matters

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A good listener makes a significant difference.

My dear friend's mother, who contacted me often over the years, said "sharing a problem with someone who understands, divides the pain." Her wisdom about talking to another, especially if they are well trained, has proven to help many individuals in emotional stress. Research even reveals a positive change in brain chemistry when we feel heard and understood.

At some point in our lives, we all experience problems that seem too persistent to handle alone. Our pride and fears oftentimes get in the way of asking for help. Yet, it is important to know, making the decision to seek help is a sign of strength and courage. In fact, it can make the difference between feeling that things are spinning out of control and/or gaining new tools to turn your life around in positive ways.

Having taken the crucial first step to seek help, you may have some questions about therapy. You may wonder, for example, about sharing information that is very, very private – will it be kept confidential? What is the best way to go about finding the right therapist?

Mental Health America acknowledges that all mental health professionals are ethically bound to keep what you say during therapy confidential. However, therapists are also bound by law to report information such as child abuse and neglect and threats to harm yourself or another person.

Therapy is a collaborative process, so finding the right match – someone with whom you have a sense of rapport – is critical. You may have to check out a couple of therapists to find someone with whom you are comfortable. After you find someone, keep in mind that therapy is work and sometimes can be painful. And it is also rewarding and life changing.

Whether you seek help from a licensed professional counselor, a social worker, a psychologist or a psychiatrist, the steps to choosing the right mental health practitioner for you will basically be the same.

Talk with your primary health care physician to rule out a medical cause of your problems. After you know your problems are not caused by a medical condition, find out what the mental health coverage is available through your insurance policy or through Medicaid/Medicare and who the providers are.

Get two or three referrals before making an appointment. Specify age, sex, cultural diversity or religious background if those characteristics are important to you. Your primary care physician and/or your faith leader may know mental health care professionals in your area. Also, ask friends, colleagues and those you respect about who they might recommend. Chances are you will find that several people in your circle of acquaintances have been, or are, in therapy and can refer you to a competent therapist.

Call to find out about appointment availability, location, and fees. Many mental health professionals schedule evening appointments so you do not have to miss work. Selecting a therapist whose office is convenient to get to – either from work or home – can also make a difference in your progress toward improved recovery.

When you call for an appointment ask the receptionist:

- Does the mental health professional offer a sliding-scale fee based on income?
- Do they accept your health insurance or Medicaid/Medicare?
- Make sure the therapist has experience helping people whose problems are similar to yours. You may want to ask the receptionist about the therapist's expertise, education and number of years in practice.
- If you are satisfied with the answers, make an appointment.

During your first visit, describe those feelings and problems that led you to seek help.

Find out:

- What kind of therapy/treatment program they recommend
- Has it proven effective for dealing with problems such as yours
- How many therapy sessions the mental health professional recommends
- Are they willing to coordinate your care with another practitioner if you are personally interested in exploring credible alternative therapies?

Different psychotherapies and medications are tailored to meet specific needs. The best therapists will work with you to create an individualized treatment plan.

Although the role of a therapist is not to be a friend, rapport is a critical element of successful therapy. After your initial visit, take some time to explore how you felt about the therapist.

For example:

- Were they someone with whom you felt comfortable?
- Did they listen?
- Did they seem to understand your concerns and address them?
- Is this a person you feel you can trust?

If the answers to these questions and others that you ask are "Yes" schedule another appointment to begin the process of working together to identify your strengths and understand and overcome your challenges and problems.

If the answers are "no" call another mental health professional from your referral list and schedule another appointment.

For any questions specific to mental health and/or alcohol and drug problems, please call the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County at (419) 281-3139 or see the Network of Care website at www.ashlandmhrb.org. The Board funds a network of mental health and addiction services provided by Appleseed Community Mental Health Center, Catholic Charities Services of Ashland County, and the Ashland County Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (ACCADA) and Ashland County Lifework. For questions specific to grief or bereavement call Diane Park or Martha Jorden at Hospice of North Central Ohio (419) 281-7107.