

Mental health providers: Tips on finding one

Mental health providers: Credentials, services offered and what to expect.

If you've never seen a mental health provider before, you may not know how to find one who suits your specific needs. Here are some things to keep in mind as you search for a mental health provider.

DECIDING WHAT TYPE OF MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDER YOU NEED

Mental health providers are licensed professionals who diagnose mental health conditions and provide treatment. Most have either a master's degree or more advanced education and training. Mental health providers must meet certain licensing requirements before they can offer mental health services. The services a mental health provider offers depend on training and specialty area.

Here are some of the most common types of mental health providers and the services they provide:

Type of mental health provider	Prescribes medication?	Provides psychological counseling?	What they do
Primary care provider (M.D., D.O., N.P., P.A.)	Yes.	In most cases, general advice and support.	Primary care providers can diagnose mental illness and prescribe medications. Most primary care doctors, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants have limited expertise in treating complex mental health problems.
Licensed professional counselor (LPC)	No.	Yes.	Licensed counselors provide psychological counseling (psychotherapy) for a range of concerns. They usually have at least a master's degree. Counselors may specialize in certain areas, such as career counseling, marriage issues or substance abuse. They work in private practice, community agencies, hospitals, employee assistance programs and in other settings.
Psychiatric nurse (R.N., A.P.R.N)	Some do.	Yes.	Psychiatric nurses are registered nurses who have training in mental health. Their level of training and experience determines what services they can offer. Advanced practice registered nurses have at least a master's degree in psychiatric-mental health nursing. In general, they can diagnose and treat mental illnesses, and in some states advanced practice nurses can prescribe medications.
Psychiatrist (M.D., D.O.)	Yes.	Yes.	Psychiatrists are medical doctors who specialize in mental health. Some psychiatrists further specialize in

			areas such as child and adolescent, geriatric or addiction psychiatry.
Psychologist (Ph.D., PsyD., Ed.D.)	Generally not.	Yes.	Psychologists are trained specialists in psychology — a science that deals with thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Like licensed counselors, psychologists provide psychotherapy in one-on-one or group settings. Most psychologists hold a doctoral and undergo postgraduate training.
Clinical social worker (M.A., M.S., M.S.W., M.S.S.W., D.S.W., PhD)	No.	Yes.	Social work is a broad profession. In general, social workers help people overcome social and health problems by providing a range of services. Most social workers have a masters or more advanced degree. Social workers who provide mental health services have specialized training.

WHAT TYPE OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES DO YOU NEED?

Consider these factors when choosing among the various types of mental health providers:

- **Your concern or condition.** Most mental health providers can provide treatment for a range of conditions, but a mental health provider with a specialized focus may be more suited to your needs. For example, if you have an eating disorder, you may need to see a psychologist or licensed counselor who specializes in that area. If you're interested in resolving concerns in your family environment, you may want to consult a marriage and family therapist. In general, the more severe your symptoms or complex your diagnosis, the more expertise and training you need to look for in a mental health provider. You may need to see more than one mental health provider to meet your needs.
- **Whether you need medications, counseling or both.** Only certain mental health providers can prescribe medications. Your primary care provider (family doctor, general internist, pediatrician, nurse practitioner, or physician's assistant) can diagnose mental health conditions and prescribe medications. However, depending on your concern and the severity of your symptoms, your doctor may recommend that you see a mental health expert. You may need to see more than one mental health provider. For example, you may need to see a psychiatrist to manage your medications and a psychologist or another mental health provider for counseling.
- **Your health insurance coverage.** Your insurance policy may have a list of specific mental health providers covered, or your insurance may only cover certain types of mental health providers. Check ahead of time with your insurance company, Medicare or Medicaid to find out what types of mental health services are covered and what your benefit limits are.

HOW CAN YOU FIND A MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDER?

Here's where to start:

- Ask your health insurance company for a list of covered providers. Many insurance companies make a list of providers they cover available on the Internet.
- Contact the OhioCares behavioral health staff at 800-761-0868.
- Seek a referral or recommendation from your primary care provider.
- Ask trusted friends, family or clergy.

- Check phone book listings under such categories as community service numbers, counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists or social services organizations.
- Search nonprofit, government or mental health organization websites that provide listings of providers.
- Check to see whether your company's employee assistance program (EAP) or student health center offer mental health services, or ask for a referral.
- Contact a local or national mental health organization by phone or on the Internet. One good place to start is with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

WHAT SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR IN A MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDER?

Here are some things to keep in mind when considering a mental health provider:

- Which particular services they offer.
- Education, training, licensure and years in practice. Licensing requirements vary widely by state.
- Office hours, fees and length of sessions.
- Which insurance providers they work with, or if they work with Medicare or Medicaid.
- Areas of specialization.
- Treatment approaches and philosophy.

Don't hesitate to ask lots of questions. Finding the right match is crucial to establishing a good relationship and getting the most out of your counseling sessions or appointments.

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