



Finding the Right Mental Health Professional for You



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Finding a mental health professional is one of the most important steps in starting on the path toward a successful recovery. As hard as it might be to acknowledge that you need help, the search for a specialist who fits your needs—someone who can serve as your ally—can be even more challenging. It can be overwhelming and intimidating, especially if you are new to the process, struggling with your condition or don't know how or where to start. But finding that person is crucial to getting the care you need, getting the most out of your treatment and achieving your recovery goals.



There are many steps that go into [finding the right mental health professional](#). Here are some tips to guide you through your search for the right one for you.

Think About Who You're Looking For

You may be seeking a mental health professional for a number of reasons, but it is important to understand what type of treatment or care you need so that you know what type of professional to look for.

Ask yourself what you need help with. Do you need a psychiatrist to prescribe and monitor medications? Maybe you have your medication under control, but need a clinical psychologist or mental health nurse to provide therapy and assessment. Maybe you need a social worker or peer specialist to provide counseling—someone who can assist you in finding housing, employment or paying for treatment. You may need holistic care from multiple professionals. It is also important to do some research into your condition, and the most effective treatment, and look for a provider trained in that area of focus. Once you have determined what type of professional you need, it is time to do a bit of research and asking around in order to find that person.

Start the Search

There are a variety of ways to search for mental health professionals. Ask your primary care doctor or some of your other health professionals for referrals. If you are a student, contact your school's counseling center. Ask family, friends and peers from support groups for recommendations. Spend some time searching online for providers in your area. Call your health insurance company to obtain a list of professionals who are covered under your plan.

Kate Wichmann, a NAMI Northern Virginia NAMI In Our Own Voice presenter who has received treatment for 10 years, took a unique path in her search for a psychiatrist: She went to a psychiatrist's book reading and asked him for a suggestion. For Wichmann, finding the right treatment provider was not just about asking, "Who is good, and who is bad?" but rather stating, "This is what I'm looking for."

Be the Interviewer

Once you have found a few professionals who seem like they could be a fit, make an appointment and prepare for the initial visit. Come to the session with a list of questions or topics you want to talk about. This will help you get the information you need to make the best decision for you. Ask about their training, experience and treatment approach. You may find that he or she specializes in certain disorders, populations or age groups. Seek out the professionals that have worked with others similar to you and have experience with your diagnosis.

Having the right knowledge is key. The person might be a fantastic professional with an impressive resume and reputation, but not have the right experience and knowledge base. This part of the search can be frustrating. “I had at least one situation where I liked my doctor—he was trying really hard—but he didn’t have the needed knowledge for my complicated circumstances,” says Wichmann.

Figure out how often you will meet and how your progress will be evaluated. Ask about office hours, session length, and having family attend appointments with you if that is something important to you. If you are concerned about being able to contact the professional outside of your appointment time, make sure to ask.

One visit can be enough to determine whether the person is the wrong fit, but it is not necessarily enough time to determine whether it will be a working, successful fit. “You aren’t going to feel extremely comfortable divulging everything on the first session, but stick it out,” recommends Syeda Younus, a NAMI Northern Virginia program leader and a seven-year user of mental health services. After attending several sessions, think about how you feel and whether your needs are being met.

Evaluate the Relationship

“A good match is like a good relationship,” Younus says. In a strong, collaborative relationship with your provider, you should “feel comfortable conveying sensitive information and speaking openly.” There should be a sense of mutual care for each other and a feeling that this person is on your side. For Younus, a healthy relationship means that she feels at ease being herself, whether she is smiling, joking, crying or complaining.

In a valuable relationship with her provider, Wichmann says, “I feel like we’re equal partners. We both have a role.” Her provider is not above her looking down and lecturing her on what to do and how to feel. Instead, they are on the same level, as two members of a team. A great provider listens to the person not only as a patient, but as a person with a life story that goes beyond symptoms and diagnosis.

Even though it can be difficult to trust your judgment when you are struggling, pay attention to your instincts and trust your gut reaction. Fanny Bowley, a NAMI program leader with 25 years of treatment experience, has relied on whether she feels a positive vibe from the professional after several appointments. When deciding whether the professional is worth keeping, Bowley also asks herself these questions:

- Do I feel safe, understood and comfortable?
- Do I feel free to express myself?
- Are my concerns being accepted and respected?
- Does my professional have my full confidence and trust?
- Is the professional meeting my recovery needs?
- Do I feel that I am making progress?
- Does this person believe in me and my capacity for wellness?

Bowley recommends keeping a log at home of how you are feeling and what you are thinking. If after a while the person doesn’t feel right to you, or you realize that the person doesn’t fit your needs or treatment style, you have the ability and power to find another one. “Own your appointment visits,” says Bowley. “It is your recovery and all about what you do and how you feel.”

There are several red flags to look out for that these NAMI leaders spoke of, including that the professional is not listening, doesn’t seem interested in your story, dismisses your feelings or speaks to you condescendingly. “If I feel my voice is being disrespected and the person does not genuinely care

about me, then I will immediately look for someone new,” Younus says. She adds that if she feels uncomfortable around the person, she might hold back information that is vital to receiving optimal care.

How to Know When You’ve Found the One

“Having a good professional needs to be a priority,” says Wichmann. Finding this person can be hard, painful work, especially if you are dealing with a serious, long-untreated condition. It can also be difficult to prioritize the search when you don’t have much energy, enthusiasm or motivation. “However, once you get over the

hump,” Wichmann says, finding someone with whom you can build “a successful, longterm relationship leads to rewarding, life-changing outcomes.”

Remind yourself that you have the power to take charge of your recovery and well-being. You get to decide who is right for you and who you want to add to your support network. You hold the reins. Challenge yourself not to settle for good enough. Push for better. Don't feel compelled to stay with a provider if you are not comfortable or don't think this person has the necessary experience to help you reach your goals.

“Your mental health professionals are an incredibly important part of your recovery,” says Bowley, “so pick the very best ones you can.”

Just like any other relationship, you probably aren't going to find the ideal professional on the first try. If your first attempt does not prove successful, don't give up. Finding someone who will be invested in your long-term wellness, through thick and thin, takes experimentation. Be persistent and always be honest with yourself. “If you do, this will probably be one of the most valuable relationships in your life,” Younus says, “and you can thank yourself for that.”

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