

+ Mental Health Care FAQ

If you don't have experience with mental health professionals, it can feel daunting to reach out. Where do I start? What kind of professional should I see? What happens at an appointment? What about a virtual visit? Getting answers to your questions can make it easier to take the first step.

Why make the call?

While mental health support is vital in a crisis, it's also a valuable tool that we can use when the challenges we face are not a crisis. To use an analogy, we definitely need the help of an auto specialist if our car breaks down, but we know that turning to them for regular maintenance can help us spot and work on trouble spots before they grow into larger problems. They can also help keep our vehicle running at its best.

People seek professional support for many reasons. Some want help with thoughts, emotions, or repeated behavior patterns that are reducing their quality of life. It may be a specific concern that they need help with – grief, relationship problems, disordered eating, or substance use, for example. Others may want to understand themselves better to grow. Or perhaps it's just a desire for someone who is trained in mental health to listen and help with general problem-solving.

It can help to think of mental health care in the same way you think of physical health care. If something is causing pain or irritation or slowing you down, if there is something you'd like to correct or improve or just have questions about, a professional can help.

Who's who?

A hurdle in getting started is understanding the differences between care providers. The primary differences are education/degree, focus, and ability to prescribe medication.

Mental Health Counselor or Therapist

- + Master's degree
- + Licensure/certification varies
- + Trained to evaluate mental health and provide therapy based on specific training programs.

Clinical Social Worker

- + Master's degree in social work
- + Licensure varies by state
- + Trained to evaluate mental health and provide therapy based on specific training programs.

Psychologist

- + Doctoral degree
- + State licensed
- + Trained to evaluate mental health with testing and interviews. Can diagnose, provide therapy. Can't prescribe medication in most states.

Psychiatrist

- + Medical doctor who specializes in mental health
- + State licensed, may also be board-certified
- + Trained to diagnose mental health conditions, prescribe/manage medication, provide therapy.

Certified Peer Specialist

- + Specialists who have personal experience with a mental health condition or substance use
- + Trained, certified, and able to help with goal setting, mentoring, support and guidance.

What do all those letters mean?

There are many acronyms in mental health. The following examples and resources may be helpful as you research your options.

Credentials

Once a professional has an advanced degree, they take tests and must complete a set number of supervised hours to qualify for a **license**.

Certification requires the same education and testing but does not require supervised hours.

Professionals are required to attend ongoing education to maintain their license or certification.

Examples:

CAC: Certified Addictions Counselor

CAP: Certified Addiction Professional

NCC: National Certified Counselor

LAC: Licensed Addiction Counselor

LPC: Licensed Professional Counselor

LMHC: Licensed Mental Health Counselor

LMFT: Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

LCSW: Licensed Clinical Social Worker

LP/Ph.D./Psy.D: Licensed Psychologist

MD/DO: Doctor of Medicine/Osteopathic Medicine

NPP-C: Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner

You'll also see many therapy acronyms: CBT, DBT, ACT, EMDR, and so on. Each type uses a different approach to support clients. Learn more at: psychologytoday.com/us/types-of-therapy

Resources

[Psychology Today: Find a Therapist](#)

[APA: Psychologist Locator](#)

[SAMHSA Treatment Locator](#)

[988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Dial 988](#)

Factors to consider

Qualifications: Look for a professional who is trained, licensed, or certified. Review specialties if you're seeking to address specific concerns.

Personal criteria: You may prefer to work with someone of a certain age, gender, ethnicity, or who speaks a certain language.

Treatment philosophy: Explore and think about if the description of their approach resonates with you. Does it align with how you're thinking about therapy?

Insurance coverage/cost. Determining what your insurance covers and which professionals are within your network is a good first step. However, not all therapists work with insurance. You can ask about the use of sliding fee scales, which is common.

Availability. Many professionals will note whether they're accepting new patients and if they offer evening appointments. Many book far out; when you call, ask how quickly you will be able to be seen.

Accessibility. You may potentially be seeing this individual 1-2 times per week. Having a nearby office can be a valuable benefit. However, most professionals are now also offering remote visits, which may make this factor less of an issue.

Keep in mind

Most therapists offer an initial consult to answer questions and help you determine if they'll be a fit, often at no cost.

The goal is to find a person who will be a good partner in helping you reach your goals. If, after several visits, you aren't connecting, it's okay to let them know that and restart your search for someone new.

More information:

[Psychology Today: Demystifying Therapy](#)