



FINDING A MENTAL HEALTH FRIENDLY DOCTOR

What this fact sheet covers:

- Introduction
- Doctor's interest in mental health
- Mental health training
- Where to look for a doctor who might suit you
- What you can expect of a GP who is helping you with your mental health
- Characteristics of a good mental health assessment

Introduction

Mental illnesses and psychological distress are difficult things to talk about. It is important for sufferers to find a general practitioner (GP) who is knowledgeable, skilled and helpful and with whom they feel comfortable to share private details about their health. Here are some clues to help people find the right GP.

Ask the GP if they are interested in mental health

Traditionally GPs have dealt with all sorts of problems relating to their patients. Naturally, individual GPs have certain areas of health that interest them. Some GPs are more interested and comfortable with physical health matters and don't have a special interest in mental health. They might prefer not to manage mental health issues but have to for various reasons including feeling that they can't say no.

However, there are many GPs who do have a special interest in mental health. It's okay to ask your GP if they feel comfortable dealing with your psychological and mental health issues. Give them a chance to say "no". If they do say no, ask them if they can recommend anyone who does have an interest or skills in mental health. Most will be happy to refer you on. If they don't want to refer you on, you are entitled to find another GP.

Look for clues – certain factors in GP clinics can tell you about the quality of mental health care they provide:

- Friendly reception staff
- Long consultations where necessary
- Urgent appointments can be accommodated
- Arrangements can be made for after hours and emergency care (not necessarily by the practice itself)
- Follow-up arrangements are made
- Contact arrangements are clear and well defined
- Bulk billing is available if necessary



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Find out if the GP has had any mental health training

In Australia, doctors don't need any special training in mental health to practice as GPs. There are some special Medicare item numbers related to mental health which all GPs can use and another set which are only available to GPs who have undertaken a certain amount of extra training. GPs are required to have 20 hours of specific training about a mental health issue to be accredited by Medicare and to claim Mental Health item numbers. However, some GPs complete significantly more training in mental health.

Some GPs have a Masters degree in Mental Health, some have Diplomas and some have a collection of training that they have completed out of interest rather than for financial gain. Looking after patients with mental health problems takes more time and traditionally GPs make less money if they spend more time with patients. Some GPs without extra formal training will have gained their skill working in environments or communities with a high incidence of mental health problems so their experience will be as valuable as formal qualifications. It is perfectly reasonable to talk to your GP about their experience and qualifications.

Where to look for a GP who might suit you

Friends, relatives and neighbours can be useful in helping to find a good GP. However, they may not understand that you need someone with a mental health focus and they may have loyalties that have nothing to do with the GP's skill as a practitioner!

Your local **community mental health centre** and the local Division of General Practice will know about the GPs in your area and who is good at mental health care. GP Divisions are support organisations for GPs and they provide education for the GPs in your area. Some Divisions will have lists of GPs with an interest in mental health and so may be able to help you. You can get more information about Divisions of General Practice from www.gp.org.au

Do you like this person and feel you can talk to them openly?

Qualifications, training and experience all help to make a therapeutic relationship work but the relationship you have with your GP as a person is important too. You shouldn't expect to have a personal relationship with your GP but you are entitled to expect a respectful relationship. If you do not feel comfortable talking to your GP then it is unlikely that they will be able to help you with your mental health problems.



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What you can expect of a GP who is helping you with your mental health

- Support
- Availability for ongoing care
- Knowledge about the medication you are taking
- Knowledge about the health professionals to whom you may need referrals and the kind of work they do
- A thorough assessment of your situation and comprehensive documentation of you and your illness

Characteristics of a good mental health assessment

It is not possible to do a thorough mental health assessment quickly. A GP who already knows you may be able to assess your situation in twenty minutes but a GP who is unfamiliar with you, your life circumstances and your general health will need to take a lot longer to do a thorough job and get a clear idea of the nature of your illness and the appropriate treatment for you.

A mental health assessment involves questions about:

- Recent and past psychological and emotional experience
- Physical health (which may have an influence on your mental health)
- Lifestyle (drugs, alcohol, exercise habits, sleeping patterns and diet all play a part in your mental wellbeing)
- Family history of physical and mental illness
- Cultural background and spiritual beliefs
- Social environment (do you live alone, have supportive family and/or friends, have a social life? – these things are all important to your recovery and may impact on treatment planning)
- Any past treatment you have had
- Work and financial situation (which may impact both on your mental health and your treatment options)
- Any important experiences in your childhood that may have contributed to your vulnerability to mental illness (this may influence the type of therapy that is appropriate for you)
- Preferences about what kind of treatment you have

At the end of the assessment there should be:

- A provisional (most likely) diagnosis
- A differential diagnosis (i.e. a list of other possibilities)
- A draft management plan
- Some information or educational material about the diagnosis and management plan



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Confidentiality goes without saying...

You are allowed to ask a GP about the conditions under which they would reveal personal information to another party. Most GPs will only reveal information if your life is at risk or the safety of others is of concern but they may also ask your permission to involve someone like a friend or family member in your care at other times. They should stick to your decision. Information needs to be shared between professionals if they are part of a professional team caring for you. You may however request that some information is not shared if you wish.

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