

# How To Participate In Your Mental Health Care



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## **Why participate in your care?**

Many people rely on psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental health providers to be the experts in their care. While these people are experts in delivering certain types of mental health care, they are not the experts on you. Others rely on family members to speak up for them. Family members can be a valuable part of the team when they help you see things from a different angle, coordinate your care, intervene in a crisis, and help with insurance and billing questions. While family members know you very well, they can only describe what they see from the outside. Only you can describe how you are feeling, whether a medication is helpful, and whether any side effects medications cause are OK with you. Only you can decide whether a proposed treatment sounds like something that will work for you. The best care is achieved when professionals, concerned family members and the individual living with a mental illness all work together.

## **Who is involved in your treatment?**

You may have a team of people involved in your treatment. Mental Health Case Managers are people who help you find resources you may need. Medications are prescribed by psychiatrists, medical doctors, physician assistants and some nurses. Therapists, psychologists and social workers can provide therapy, but do not prescribe medications.

It is important to know what the members of your team are responsible for. It is helpful to create a list of all of the people on your team, their role in your care, and how to contact them. When you meet with a professional for the first time, add them to your list. Don't forget to include contact information for family and friends you can reach out to in the event of a crisis. Include any other crisis numbers that are helpful to you as well, such as your local crisis response team. You can keep contact information in your phone, but keep the information somewhere else, too, in case your phone is damaged or lost. Keep the information somewhere it will be easy to find. Consider giving a copy to a parent or other family member who can help you coordinate your care. In the event of a crisis, that family member can help contact your treatment team.

## **How do I find a mental health professional?**

If you have health insurance with mental health coverage, call your insurance provider to find out which mental health providers are in the company's network. Professionals who are in the network will cost you less money. If the list of providers is long, ask others, such as your family doctor, whether they have recommendations from that list. Call the providers and ask if they are taking new patients. If they have a waiting list, ask what the average wait time is for a new patient to get an appointment. If you need to see someone sooner, ask if they have any emergency appointments. You can also ask them to contact you if someone cancels an appointment in the future.

If you do not have insurance coverage for mental health care, look for a clinic that bills on a sliding scale based on your income. You can find these clinics by calling 211 or your county's Adult Mental Health Department. This department can be found on your county's web site.

## **What are some questions I should ask the first time I see professional?**

- What are your office hours?
- What are your qualifications?
- Do you have experience successfully treating people with my diagnosis?
- What methods do you use?

- How long does this treatment usually take, and how often will I need to see you?
- When should I start seeing results?
- What should I do if I don't feel the treatment is working?
- What other treatment options are available?
- Do you encourage family involvement in my care?
- Do you have an after-hours crisis line? If not, who should I call if I am experiencing a crisis?

### **How do I participate in my treatment?**

If you need to miss an appointment, make sure to contact your mental health care provider as soon as possible to cancel or reschedule the appointment. Some clinics charge patients for missed appointments, and these charges will not be covered by insurance. Other clinics may stop seeing patients who miss appointments without cancelling them.

Start preparing for your appointment before it begins. Think about how you have been feeling. Talk with family members and trusted friends about what they have seen since your last appointment. Remember to think about all the time that has passed since your last appointment, not just how you are feeling today. Many people with mental illnesses track their moods on a calendar, with a phone app, or on a web site like [www.moodtracker.com](http://www.moodtracker.com). Write down any key points you want to make at your appointment. If you have questions, write those down too so you don't forget them. Consider bringing your parents, other family member or a friend to appointments, especially if things haven't been going well. They can take notes, help ask questions and describe what they have seen.

When you get to your appointment, provide an update on how you have been doing. If a mental health or medical professional says something you don't understand, ask him/her to explain it to you. Keep asking questions until you understand exactly what they are saying and what is being recommended for your care. If you don't agree with a proposal, speak up about it. Don't be afraid to ask more questions, or simply respectfully say that you don't agree with a suggested treatment. Take notes during the appointment.

Many people with mental illnesses go through several medications before they find one that works well and has manageable side effects. Keep a list or chart of the medications you have tried and what the results and side effects were. Keep a list of the medications you are currently taking along with doses in your purse or wallet. These lists can be provided to future health care providers. It's also a good idea to provide a copy to a family member so they can share information in the event of a medical emergency or crisis.

### **What questions should I ask about medications?**

- What do you hope this medication will do for me?
- Have you prescribed this medication for other people with my diagnosis? Was it effective?
- What are the side effects?
- Are any of these side effects dangerous or life-threatening?
- What should I do if I experience these side effects? (Wait to see if they go away, stop taking the medication, call you?)
- Are there alternative treatments that don't require medication?
- What should I do to maintain mental health in addition to taking this medication?
- How long does this medication take to start working?
- What should I do if this medication is not working?
- What should I do if this medication makes me feel worse?
- How will this medication interact with other medications I am taking, such as birth control?
- What will happen if I drink alcohol with this medication?
- How will this medication interact with over-the-counter medications?
- What will happen if I use street drugs with this medication? (If this applies).

*Never stop taking a medication without first speaking with your prescriber. Stopping some medications abruptly can cause a sudden return of symptoms or other serious side effects.*

**What if I don't feel like a professional is listening to me?**

It is important to have a professional relationship based on trust in order for mental health treatment to be effective. If you don't feel like a professional is listening to you, respectfully let them know how you feel. Be honest about what is and is not working. Give the professional time to improve things. If the relationship does not improve, consider seeking a new provider. Remember that many providers have waiting lists. Make sure you will be able to find a new provider who can work with you before you stop working with your current one.

*Updated May 2013; April 2017*