

# Finding a mental health friendly doctor



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.

## Is the GP interested in mental health?

Traditionally GPs have dealt with all sorts of problems relating to their patients. Naturally, individual GPs have certain areas of practice 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 do so 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

## What this fact sheet covers:

- 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

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. These include:

- the reception staff are friendly
- long consultations are available if necessary
- accommodating urgent appointments
- 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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## Does the GP have mental health training?

In Australia, doctors don't need any special training in mental health to practice as GPs. 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. Some GPs without extra formal training will have gained skill working in environments or communities with a high incidence of mental health problems so their experience may be as valuable as formal qualifications. It is perfectly reasonable to ask 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** will know GPs in your area who are especially interested in mental health.

## 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.

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

Some of the things you should be able to expect from your GP include:

- support
- a thorough assessment of your situation and comprehensive documentation of you and your illness

- availability for ongoing care
- knowledge about the medications you are taking
- knowledge about the health professionals to whom you may need referrals and the kind of work they do.

## 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 get a clear idea of the nature of your illness and the appropriate treatment for you. It may take several long consultations to fully understand your situation and join with you to make a plan of action.

A mental health assessment involves questions about many things that can impact on your mental health including your:

- physical health (which may have an influence on your mental health)
- lifestyle (including drugs, alcohol, exercise habits, sleeping patterns and diet)
- family history of physical and mental illness
- recent and past psychological and emotional experience
- cultural background and spiritual beliefs
- social environment (eg details of your living arrangements and social activities)
- past treatments
- work and financial situation
- important childhood experiences
- preferences about your treatment.



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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.

## Confidentiality goes without saying...

It is important to ask the 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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