



Finding a Mental Health Friendly GP

Fact Sheet

Introduction

Mental illnesses and psychological distress are difficult things to talk about. It is important for sufferers to find a GP who is knowledgeable, skilled and willing to help and with whom they feel comfortable enough to share these very private details of their life. Here are some clues to help you find the right person

First – ask them if they are interested in mental health.

Traditionally GPs have dealt with all the problems that come through their door, and have been under pressure to do so. Naturally, individual GPs have particular areas of health that interest them and with which they feel comfortable. Some GPs are more interested and comfortable with matters related to physical health and choose not to have a special interest in mental health. They would often prefer not to manage those issues but find themselves doing so despite themselves for a whole variety of reasons including feeling that they cannot say no.

There are however many who do have a special interest in mental health. It is reasonable and appropriate 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 someone else yourself.

Clues – what can you see in a practice that gives you some signals about the quality of mental health care they provide?

- Reception staff are friendly
- Long consultations are available 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 – your GP needs to know how to look after him or herself in order to be well enough to look after you!
- Bulk billing is available if necessary

Find out what if any mental health training the GP has had.

In Australia, doctors do not need to have had any special training in mental health at all to practice as general practitioners. 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. The most that is required of a GP to be accredited by Medicare to claim Mental Health item



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numbers is 20 hours of specific training about one mental health issue or another. This may be all your GP has had or they may have had much more.

You will find that some GPs have a Masters degree in Mental Health, some have Diplomas and some have a collection of training that they have undertaken themselves out of interest rather than in the cause of financial gain. In fact, 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.

Deciphering a GP's qualifications:

GP qualifications look like this:

- Basic medical training is either **MB BS** or **MB** which stand for Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery. More recent graduates may have a different sort of Bachelor degree as well such as BSc (Bachelor of Science), BSc Med (Bachelor of Medical Science) or BA (Bachelor of Arts) as they will have done another degree before entering a "post graduate" medical program. Sometimes their first degree will have been in psychology but you won't necessarily be able to tell from their qualifications.
- Many GPs also have **FRACGP** after their name which means they have spent a number of additional years training to be GPs within a special program run by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. If they come from overseas the qualification may look slightly different (e.g. FRCGP in the UK). These programs sometimes include some mental health components.
- A body called the GPMHSC accredits GPs for the special mental health item numbers. Six hours accredited training gives a GP a "Level 1" qualification. An additional 20 hours training provides a "Level 2" qualification. These levels of qualification allow a GP to claim or charge the special mental health item numbers. Most GPs do not display these qualifications but you can ask the GP or the reception staff whether the GP has Level 1 or Level 2 mental health accreditation. They should know the answer because of the item numbers they claim or charge.
- Other qualifications relevant to mental health include Masters of Psychological Medicine (**MPsychMed**), Masters of General Practice Psychiatry or Diplomas of Shared Care Psychiatry in various fields of mental health practice. Masters degrees generally involve two years of study while diplomas take a year or less to complete.
- If your doctor has letters after their name that you don't understand they will usually be delighted to tell you what they mean as they have worked hard to gain the qualification. Ask them too which institution they studied at to give you a better idea of what it means.



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Where to look for someone who might suit you

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

Your local **community mental health centre** will have an idea of the GPs in your area who are good at mental health care and so will the local **Division of General Practice**. GP Divisions are support organisations for GPs and among other things they provide education for the GPs in your area. Some Divisions will have lists of GPs with an interest in mental health and 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 the practitioner as a person is important too. Don't expect to have a personal relationship with your practitioner 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 very much with your mental health problems

What you can expect of a GP who is helping look after your mental health.

- Support
- Availability for ongoing care
- Knowledge about the drugs you take
- Knowledge about the people to whom you may need referral and the kind of work they do
- A thorough assessment of your situation and comprehensive documentation of you and your illness

What are the characteristics of a good mental health assessment?

It is not possible to do a thorough mental health assessment quickly. A GP who knows you already 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 considerably longer to do a thorough job and have a clear idea of the nature of your illness and the appropriate treatment for you.

A mental health assessment involves questions about:

- your recent and past psychological and emotional experience
- your physical health (which may have an influence on your mental health)



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- your lifestyle (drugs, alcohol, exercise habits, sleeping patterns and diet all play a part in your mental wellbeing)
- your family history of physical and mental illness
- your cultural background and spiritual beliefs
- your 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
- your 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)
- your preferences about what kind of treatment you have

At the end of all that there should be:

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

Confidentiality goes without saying...

But you are entitled to ask a practitioner about the conditions under which he or she 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 abide by your decision.

It is understood that 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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