

# When Should You Consult a Mental Health Professional?

Most of us experience times when we need help to deal with problems and issues that cause us emotional distress. When you are having a problem or dilemma that is making you feel overwhelmed, you may benefit from the assistance of an experienced, trained professional. Professional counselors and therapists offer the caring, expert assistance that people need during stressful times.

There are many types of mental health providers to choose from. The most important thing is to select a licensed professional who has the appropriate training and qualifications to help a person with your specific issues. You should also choose someone with whom you can feel comfortable enough to speak freely and openly.

## **Types of Problems**

People seek the assistance of a mental health professional (MHP) for many different reasons. These are some of the most common:

1. You feel unhappy most of the time.
2. You worry all the time and are unable to find the solutions to your problems.
3. You feel extremely sad and helpless.
4. You feel nervous, anxious, and worried most of the time.
5. You have panic attacks.
6. You have a hard time concentrating.
7. Your emotional state is affecting your daily life: your sleep, eating habits, job, and relationships.
8. You are having a hard time functioning from day to day. Your emotional state is affecting your performance at work or school.
9. Your behavior is harmful to yourself or to others.
10. You are feeling impatient and angry with someone you are taking care of.
11. You are having problems with your family members or in other important relationships.
12. You or someone you care about has problems with substance abuse or other addictions.
13. You are the victim of sexual abuse or domestic violence.
14. You have an eating disorder.
15. You are having trouble getting over the death of someone you loved.
16. You or someone you love has a serious illness and you are having a hard time with it.
17. You feel lonely and isolated.
18. You are experiencing problems in a sexual relationship.
19. Your family has a lot of conflict and tension.
20. You are experiencing a divorce or marital separation.
21. You are having a hard time coping with change.
22. You often feel afraid, angry, or guilty.
23. You have a hard time setting and reaching goals.
24. Your child is having problems with behavior or school performance.
25. Your family is stressed because someone is ill.

26. You have a hard time talking with your partner, children, parents, family members, friends, or coworkers.
27. You are having problems dealing with your own sexual orientation or the sexual orientation of someone you care about.
28. You are planning to marry, and you have some concerns.
29. You have gotten a divorce and your family needs help adjusting.
30. You are part of a blended family and need help learning to live together.

## **Types of Mental Health Professionals**

The most common MHPs in the United States are Psychologists, Marriage and Family Therapists, Social Workers, and Professional Counselors. Each state has its own licensing laws and standards that govern each type of professional. While all licensed MHPs can help most people with problems of living, each group has its own special training in specific areas that makes them more qualified for certain types of issues. In addition, each individual therapist has a unique set of experiences that makes him or her uniquely qualified to work with certain kinds of issues.

**Psychologists** generally have a Ph.D. or Psy.D. degree in psychology from an accredited school. They must complete a rigorous internship period and pass a state licensing exam. In addition to their undergraduate college degree, most psychologists spend five to seven years in education and training. They study scientific methods and the science of human behavior, building skills for working with people who have real life problems.

**Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs)** generally have a master's degree in psychology, counseling, or a related subject from an accredited school. In most states, they must complete a supervised internship period and pass a state licensing exam. Marriage and family therapists are trained to work with people, focusing on how they relate to others. While they often work with an individual client, the focus of treatment is the set of relationships that surround the client and how those relationships impact the client. MFTs are trained in psychotherapy and family systems. They are licensed to diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders within the context of marriage, couples, and family systems. They work in a variety of settings with individuals, couples, families, children and adolescents, providing support and a fresh viewpoint as people struggle with life's challenges.

**Social Workers** have a BSW or MSW from an accredited school. They must have completed an MSW and a supervised internship before passing a state licensing exam. (Each state has its own licensing regulations.) The social work profession focuses on individual happiness and well-being in a social context. It is also concerned with the well-being of the society that surrounds the individual. Social workers are trained to pay attention to the environmental forces that may contribute to the individual's life problems.

**Licensed Counselors** have a master's degree in psychology or a related subject from an accredited school. In most states, they must complete a supervised internship period and pass a state licensing exam.

## **Referral to Other Health Professionals**

When it is in the best interest of the patient or outside the scope of the MHP's license, therapists collaborate with and refer to other health professionals, such as physicians or psychiatrists in the case of prescribing medication.

## **Confidentiality**

Each group of MHPs has strict ethical guidelines governing privacy and confidentiality. Clients of licensed MHPs can expect that discussions will be kept confidential, except as otherwise required or permitted by law. Examples of times when confidentiality must be broken are when child abuse has occurred or where the client threatens violence against another person.

When you are looking for a mental health professional to help you address your issues, it is very important to ask about a therapist's qualifications to treat your specific concerns.

### **Visit these web sites to learn more:**

<http://www.aamft.org/> (National Association of Marriage and Family Therapy)

<http://www.apa.org/> (American Psychological Association)

<http://www.naswdc.org/> (National Association of Social Work)

<http://www.counseling.org/> (American Counseling Association)

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