Getting the Help You Need

If your mental anguish is caused by more than just a bad day or an emotional rough patch resulting from a specific life event, consider seeking the help of a pro.

March 1, 2011 By David Evans

Left untreated, mental illness can result in profound consequences. Debilitating symptoms can lead to unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, even suicide. The following are key steps to achieving your optimal mental health:

See your doctor.
Schedule a comprehensive physical with your regular doctor—and be sure to tell him or her about any emotional difficulties you're experiencing. Many physical conditions and treatments can cause depression and anxiety. If all checks out physically but you're still suffering mentally, you can discuss next steps, including a referral to a mental health specialist.

Find a provider.
A referral from your primary doctor isn't the only way to connect with a mental health expert. Ask friends and family members for suggestions, especially if you know they've had good experiences themselves. National mental health organizations such as SAMHSA (samhsa.gov) and NAMI (nami.org) can also provide referrals.

Consider psychotherapy.
Psychotherapy, or talk therapy, is widely regarded as a tried-and-true treatment. It can be hard work, and your feelings of sadness or distress might seem to get worse before they get better. It's important to work with a specialist whom you feel comfortable with—it's not uncommon for people to try different therapists. Consider group psychotherapy, which is a great way to learn from others, receive validation and feel less lonely.

Consider medications.
Psychotherapeutic drugs have helped many people manage mood and anxiety disorders, including people with advanced illness unlikely to benefit from psychotherapy by itself.

Medications can only be prescribed by a licensed medical provider—either a doctor or a psychiatrist. However, psychologists and psychotherapists can work closely with other medical providers to ensure that you're being prescribed the best treatment.

You should be well informed about the medications you've been prescribed, including the timeframe in which they are expected to work, potential side effects, correct dosages and what to do if you experience problems. Also, to avoid the risk of drug interactions, tell your doctor about all medications you're taking.

Paying for Care.
Many insurance companies allow for mental illness treatment and care, but there may be limits—premiums or co-payments for psychiatric visits and prescriptions, and limited coverage for psychotherapy.

If you lack adequate health insurance—both Medicare and Medicaid also cover mental health services—you still have options. Many psychotherapists, for example, will accept sliding scale payments. You can probably find service agencies or organizations that provide psychotherapy at discount rates.

There's no one right treatment for everybody. A combination of different approaches, sometimes through a process of trial and error, is often needed.

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