Hi Alice,

I have been struggling with debilitating depression for ten years. I am finally realizing that I need help, but I’m finding it difficult to get the courage. I am very shy as well. What do you say when you call a psychiatrist or a psychologist's office? "Hi, I'm really messed up and I have no idea how this works. Do I make an appointment or what?" I'm really nervous about making the call, and what kind of questions will be asked during that first conversation. This is not an easy or comfortable topic for me to discuss, and I would have no clue about what to say after "hello." Any words you could offer would be of great help.

Thanks very much,
Worried & Confused

Answer

Dear Worried & Confused,

You already show great courage by admitting that you might benefit from getting some help. The first phone call to a mental health provider's office could represent the beginning of a process toward recovery. Yet, as you think about making this call, you worry about the unknown. So, you want to be prepared.

Actually, there are many ways that this first call could go. Let's start with who will answer the phone. If you call a group practice, mental health clinic, or medical center, chances are a receptionist or other office staff member will answer the phone. If you call a provider in private practice, the provider may answer or a voicemail may come on. If you must leave a voicemail, you could simply say, "Hello, my name is so-and-so and I am calling to speak with someone about scheduling an appointment. I can be reached at?" You can expect a return call. Once you have a person on the phone, you can use the same line, "Hello, my name is so-and-so and I am calling to speak with someone about scheduling an appointment." Each office will have its own way of getting some key information from you before scheduling the first appointment.

Here are a few questions you can probably expect during the first call:

- What is your name?
- What is a phone number where we can reach you?
- How did you find out about our services? Were you referred? If so, by whom?
What is your reason for wanting to see a mental health provider?
What type of insurance do you have, if any?

In addition, here are some questions you might want to ask them:

- Where are you located?
- What are the costs of the services?
- What are your cancellation and rescheduling policies?
- What types of treatment are offered at your office?
- What treatment philosophies or points of view are represented at your office?

You might also want to know more about how well the office could accommodate your schedule. And, do you have preferences for certain characteristics in a mental health provider? If so, you can voice them during this call. Would you like to speak directly with a mental health provider when you call an office? If that's the case, you can make that request. With more information, you may get a better feeling about how any particular office may be able to help you. Then, you may choose to make the next step: scheduling the first appointment. You may be comfortable doing this during the first call. Or, you may want to comparison shop or take some more time to mull it over. In the end, it's up to you.

If you haven't already found mental health providers in your area, you have several options. If you're a student, you can make an appointment at your school's counseling department or mental health clinic. Student or not, you can visit the National Institute of Mental Health's Getting Help: Locate Services [2] web site. If you have health insurance, your plan may have a list of providers and a procedure for connecting with those services. Look for that information on their web site or brochure. You could also call the company to get more guidance.

The top priority is finding a place where you can get the help you need. Picking up the phone is the first step. Recovery from depression is a process. It takes time, effort, and courage. Here's a technique you might try to calm your nerves before you call: sit down in a calm, quiet place. Let your eyelids close and take a sloooooooow, deep breath. Relax your body and feel the breath fill your stomach (so that your stomach puffs out when you take the breath). Hold it in for three seconds as you keep your body relaxed. Then, sloooooooowly release the breath. As you release the breath, feel some tension melt away from your body. Repeat this five or more times. Hopefully, you will feel much more relaxed after this. Now, you can try to make the call with the calm courage that you need.

With encouragement,

Alice!

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