Talking to health professionals about mental health issues

Summary

- Be open and honest with your doctor about your feelings, thoughts and behaviour.
- Tell your doctor about your general health and mental health history, symptoms and any medication you are taking.
- Speak to your doctor about any privacy concerns you have.
- Ask your doctor questions about your treatment and medication to make sure you understand everything.
- Talk to your doctor about any cultural or religious beliefs that may affect your treatment.

Talking to your doctor or mental healthcare professional, such as a psychiatrist, about your mental health issues or emotional difficulties is a positive step towards improving your mental health. Being honest and open will help you get the most appropriate treatment for your needs.

You may feel embarrassed talking about things like anxiety, abuse, voices in your head, drug or alcohol use, grief or depression, but doctors deal with these mental health concerns every day. They are trained to deal with sensitive issues and to be aware of the different needs and cultural backgrounds of the people they work with.

Your mental health professional, such as a psychologist, can help you with the current facts about your particular mental health issue, give you options based on facts, and have your best interests in mind. They will encourage you to ask questions. Your doctor or other healthcare professional will have heard similar sensitive issues or questions many times before and will not find it awkward or embarrassing.

During your mental health consultation be sure to talk about:

- your medical and mental health history
- your symptoms of concern
- sensitive issues that may be relevant to your mental health, such as illicit drug use, alcohol dependence or abuse
- any treatments or therapies you are taking, including prescription or over-the-counter medication, or herbal and vitamin supplements
- whether you have stopped another therapy or medication recently
- recent stressors or losses, such as relationship breakup or loss of employment.

Mental health privacy and confidentiality

Discussions about your mental health issue are a very personal thing and you have the right to be concerned about your privacy. Anything you talk about with your doctor or healthcare professional is private and confidential. Except in rare situations, your doctor is not allowed to talk about you and your health with anyone you know, including close family members. Your doctor or healthcare professional cannot share anything you say without your consent. There are strict rules preventing doctors from revealing your medical condition or details of a consultation.

The exception to medical confidentiality is if someone is at risk of being harmed or harming others. Even then, this rule is for your protection to make sure you are safe. Doctors can also share information if they believe a person cannot care for themselves or understand their medical issues. This can make it easier for family or carers to access information and for you to receive the most appropriate treatment.

If you are confused about what your doctor can and cannot reveal to others, you can discuss this with them at the beginning of your consultation. All doctors are aware of the laws for confidentiality and must follow these.

Building trust with your healthcare team

One of the best ways to reduce feelings of embarrassment or discomfort when talking about sensitive mental
health issues is to build a trusting working relationship with your doctor or healthcare professional – and the best way to do that is by talking openly and honestly.

Discuss any cultural or religious beliefs or feelings that may affect your health and treatment. This will help build trust as your healthcare professional will have your best interests at heart. Trust is also built by actively listening to each other.

Discuss any concerns you have about any treatment or medication and ask about how medication will affect you, and how often you should have it reviewed. Talk about your personal life too and whether or not you have friends or family who can support you during treatment.

If you do not feel comfortable talking to your current doctor, or feel that your current doctor does not have the information or expertise you need, then try to find another doctor who you feel comfortable talking to and continue your treatment with them.

**Asking questions about mental health treatment options**

Asking your doctor questions is the best way to understand what is happening with your mental health condition and to help you make a decision about your treatment.

When talking about therapy, medication or other treatment options, your doctor may use words you do not understand. If there is anything you don’t understand, ask your doctor to explain it. Do not be embarrassed to speak up. It is important that you fully understand what your doctor tells you and what they want you to do next. You can ask a family member or friend to come with you for support if you feel another person can help you.

Questions you may want to ask your doctor before making a decision about your mental health treatment include:

- What is my condition?
- What treatment options do they recommend?
- What are the benefits and risks of each treatment option?
- What happens if I don’t treat the condition?
- What is the cost of the recommended treatment?
- How long will the treatment last?
- Will I fully recover?

**Talking about your mental health medication**

It is common for a doctor or psychiatrist to prescribe medication for a mental health condition. Different types of mental health medications treat different types of mental illness, including:

- antidepressant medications
- antipsychotic medications
- mood stabilising medications.

If you have been prescribed medication it is important that you understand how to take it, why you are taking it and what to do if you have unexpected or serious side effects.

Before starting any new medication (prescribed, over-the-counter or herbal supplements), let your doctor know about any other medication, therapies or complementary medicines you are already taking – this will make sure you avoid potential problems from mixing these medications.

Speak to your doctor if you experience unwanted side effects from the medication. It may be that by adjusting the type or dosage of medication your side effects will reduce or stop.

Speak to your doctor before ceasing your medication. The dosage for some medications must be cut back gradually as it can be dangerous to suddenly stop taking them.

If you are particularly concerned and cannot reach your doctor, call the NPS Medicines Line on 1300 633 424 or the Adverse Medicines Events Line on 1300 134 237 for advice.

**Communication issues when speaking with your doctor**

If you are worried about your language, hearing or confidence issues, take someone with you to either ask
questions on your behalf, or ask for an interpreter to be present at your consultation.

If you would prefer to speak with a healthcare professional of the same gender, it is best to ask about this when you first make your appointment.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Community mental health service
- Mental healthcare professional
- Your counsellor
- Your psychiatrist

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