

What Type of Professional Should I See?

There are a wide variety of people in helping professions, and it can be confusing for someone who is looking for assistance. In general, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers are required to be licensed at the state level. Therapists and counselors are usually licensed, although it is not a requirement. Alternative health care-givers are not licensed by the state, but may be regulated. Ask questions if you are not sure, such as “What license do you hold and what board regulates that?” They will also expect you to ask about insurance coverage, specialties, and services they offer. Feel free to ask a lot of questions.

I need to be on medication for a mental health issue:

Psychiatrists have Doctor of Medicine degrees (MD) and can prescribe medication. They can administer psychological assessments, and may also provide psychotherapy (depending on geographical region of the U.S.). If you take medication for a mental health issue, it is a good idea to see the prescribing psychiatrist on a regular basis to monitor how the medication is working and deal with any side effects. Psychiatrists may work for a hospital or health organization, a clinic, or be in private practice.

I am looking for someone to help me with current abuse/neglect issues, or a persistent mental health problem:

A social worker provides case management and psychosocial services for victims of abuse or neglect, and for people severely affected by a mental health diagnoses (like Schizophrenia). They act as a coach and advocate for the client, and coordinate with other services the client may need or use. A social worker may work for a government entity (the county), a clinic or hospital setting, or be in private practice.

I need to talk to someone to get myself pulled together:

Psychologists, therapists, and counselors provide a variety of therapies for people dealing with difficulties or mental health disorders. Psychologists have a PhD or a PsyD, or may have a Master’s degree, while therapists and counselors most likely have Master’s degrees in counseling, psychology, or marriage and family therapy. Therapies usually involve discussing your difficulties (and your overall life situation) with the psychologist or counselor, then they will make a plan with you to meet your goals. There are many types of therapies, and you can ask them how they work before you make an appointment. Psychologists can also administer in-depth psychological assessments (MMPI, CPI, etc), while counselors and therapists licensed at the Master’s level can not. These include fitness-for-duty/work evaluations. Psychologists and therapists/counselors may be employed at clinics, hospitals, non-profits, or be in private practice. There are also psychologists who work in/specialize in school psychology and developmental issues.

I need to talk to someone about alcohol or drug use:

A licensed addictions counselor (LADC) can provide chemical assessments as well as individual and group counseling regarding chemical use/abuse/dependence. These counselors specialize in alcohol and drug issues, and can also provide information for people living with family members with these issues. Addictions counselors are licensed by the state, and can be found in treatment facilities, detox facilities, some clinics, and can be in private practice.

I have questions regarding spirituality, or I feel more comfortable talking to someone within my religion/belief system:

Clergy and spiritual leaders in all the main religions are “leaders” because of their level of training. Many have also received some form of training about how to counsel members of their place of worship. Some of these religious leaders may also have licensing through the state as counselors. If you are not connected with a specific place of worship, many police departments now have Police Chaplain Units. These are local members of the clergy who operate in a non-denominational role to assist the public with their problems. You do not have to be affiliated with a police department, or even live within that jurisdiction, to access a Chaplain. Check the local department website to find out if your local agency has a Chaplain unit.

I would prefer something more holistic or culturally specific:

There are a huge variety of complementary or alternative health care options available. These are not licensed by the state, but may be regulated and/or licensed through independent boards. The state, however, can investigate complaints against such providers. Alternative care can be used alone, or in conjunction with other therapies. This can include cultural practices, folk remedies, homeopathy, Reiki, healing touch, massage, acupressure, herbology, naturopathy, and many other options. Practitioners of these programs will also expect new clients to ask questions about what it is, how it can help, is it covered by insurance (some are), and whether it can be used in conjunction with other options. Your medical physician/psychologist/counselor may be able to refer you to an alternative practitioner.

Chiropractors are licensed by the state. While some people consider chiropractic care an “alternative” medical therapy, it is widely recognized and usually covered by medical insurance.