



Preparing to see your GP

Knowing who to turn to when you need to action your health concerns can be confusing and may cause anxiety if you're unfamiliar with the health system.

If you or someone close to you has emotional problems or mental health issues, there are a number of healthcare professionals who can help:

- Your GP
- Psychiatrists
- Psychologists
- Psychotherapists and Counsellors

Although many practitioners work in private practice, others are available in community health centres and in hospitals. You will need a referral from your GP to see some of these mental health professionals, but others can be seen directly by booking an appointment.

Here's a short guide to the services provided by different mental health professionals.

How a general practitioner can help

When you have an emotional or mental health problem your GP is a great place to start. GPs often work in partnership with mental health professionals. They can assess your overall health to make sure there are no physical reasons contributing to your emotional problems before referring you to other services. They can also prepare a mental health plan, refer you to the right person and prescribe the appropriate medicines if required.

Preparing to see your GP

When you see a GP for emotional problems or mental health issues, it is important to communicate a number of important things such as:

- How you feel
- Your symptoms
- Your concerns
- The circumstances that have affected your life and therefore your health
- What you feel you need to get better

It's also important to ask questions of your GP to ensure you have a full understanding of their suggested treatment. Consider asking the following:

- Why aren't I able to get over these low feelings?



Preparing to see your GP

- What am I experiencing?
- How do I treat these feelings?
- What are my options?
- Is my physical health a factor in how I feel?
- Are there any underlying medical issues?
- Do I have to go on medications?
- Are there lifestyle changes I can make?
- Can I get a referral to a therapist?
- Am I eligible for a rebate?
- What costs are involved?
- Do you have any literature to support my treatment and recovery?

Your GP (and in all likelihood a therapist) will have questions for you on the day, such as:

- What symptoms have you been experiencing?
- When did you first notice them?
- How is your life affected by your symptoms?
- What makes you feel better or worse?
- How are you sleeping?
- Are you on any medication?
- Do you take any supplements or stimulants?
- Do you drink alcohol, smoke or use recreational drugs?
- Have you tried to control your symptoms in any other way?
- Have other people around you noticed the changes?
- Do you have any family members with a mental illness?
- What do you want for yourself?

While preparing for this visit may feel stressful, writing a list of how you feel and what your questions are can help you before and during your visit. In taking notes, you will feel less overwhelmed and more empowered at the time of your consultation, and will also have a record of your session to refer back to later.

It is important to always remember that your doctor is there not to judge you, but to provide support, assessment, ongoing care and, if needed, referrals to psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health services.

How a psychologist can help



Preparing to see your GP

Psychologists can help with a range of mental health issues including problems with emotions, thinking and behaviour. The kinds of problems psychologists often treat include anxiety, depression, addictive behaviours, childhood behaviour disorders, relationship problems, eating disorders, sleep problems, sexual problems, bereavement, post-traumatic stress disorder and more.

All psychologists must legally be registered with the Psychology Board of Australia. Many practising psychologists are also members of the Australian Psychological Society. Unlike psychiatrists, psychologists **cannot** prescribe medicines. They use a range of research-based, effective psychological therapies to address mental health problems.

Psychological therapies are developed around the idea that mental health problems arise because of the way people react to, think about and perceive things. Common therapies include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT).

- CBT helps change unhelpful or unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling and behaviour using practical self-help strategies.
- IPT looks at how a person's relationships and interactions with others affect their own thoughts and behaviours.

You don't need a referral from a GP to see a psychologist. You can make an appointment by booking directly with a psychologist.

Can I get a Medicare rebate for sessions with a psychologist?

Some people are eligible for Medicare rebates for treatment by registered psychologists under a government scheme. To be eligible, you must be referred to a psychologist by your GP or psychiatrist; or, for children, by their paediatrician.

To find out if you're eligible for Medicare rebates under the program, please ask your GP. Most private health funds cover psychologists' fees, but the level of cover varies. Check with your health fund for further information.

How do I contact a psychologist?

For more information about finding and seeing a psychologist, talk to your GP. Visit the Australian Psychological Society at www.psychology.org.au or call 1800 333 497.

How a psychiatrist can help



Preparing to see your GP

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who have extra qualifications specialising in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illness and emotional problems. They are trained to recognise and treat emotional problems, as well as the effects of physical conditions on the mind.

To practice in Australia, psychiatrists must be registered with the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP). Treatment by a psychiatrist can include one or a combination of the following:

1. Psychological approaches including psychotherapy. This involves regular sessions where the psychiatrist and patient discuss problems in a way that helps the patient understand the cause of their problems.
2. Prescription medicines.

You need a **referral** from a GP to see a psychiatrist.

Can I get a Medicare rebate for sessions with a psychiatrist?

Treatment by a psychiatrist is covered by Medicare. If you see a psychiatrist as a public patient at a community health centre or a public hospital, the service is likely to be free. If you see a psychiatrist in private practice, Medicare will refund part of the psychiatrist's fee. Some psychiatrists may bulk bill some patients which means that as a patient, you don't have to pay a fee.

For more information about psychiatrists, speak to your GP. Visit the website for RANZCP [website](#) or call 1800 337 448.

How a psychotherapist or counsellor can help

Psychotherapists and counsellors can help with emotional and mental health problems. Although there is an overlap between counselling and psychotherapy, the focus of counselling is more likely to be on specific problems or life difficulties, while psychotherapy is concerned with deeper and long-term issues.

Choosing a psychotherapist or counsellor

The training background of psychotherapists and counsellors can vary. Some will have a background in psychology, social work or nursing, although it's not a requirement to be able to carry out effective therapy. Finding an appropriately qualified practitioner is essential because, unlike psychologists and psychiatrists who are required by law to be registered with an official body, **registration isn't mandatory** for counsellors and psychotherapists.



Preparing to see your GP

The training and ethical standards for counsellors and psychotherapists are set by the following professional associations:

- The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA), an umbrella organisation of professional associations of psychotherapists and counsellors. The [PACFA website](#) provides a register of practitioners who meet PACFA's professional standards or you can call them on 03 9486 3077.
- The Australian Counselling Association (ACA), the professional association of counsellors. A register of members is available on the [ACA website](#) or by phone on 07 3356 4255 or 1300 784 333.

A referral from your GP is **not required** to see a psychotherapist or counsellor.

Can I get a Medicare rebate for sessions with a psychotherapist or counsellor?

The services of psychotherapists and counsellors are only covered by Medicare if the practitioner is a psychologist or social worker with a Medicare provider number. The services of other counsellors and psychotherapists may be covered by some private health funds.

What to ask your therapist

Whether you opt to see a psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellor or other health professional, it's important to make sure the style of therapy suits your needs and that you feel comfortable and safe with the mental health professional you've chosen.

You are within your rights to question your therapist about themselves and how they can help you. It's your health, your life. Consider querying the following:

- The qualifications of your therapist
- What the treatment will involve
- How they would respond when treatment doesn't appear to work
- Whether they see people for long-term therapy or short-term therapy
- How they run their sessions; do they allow you to lead the session or is it a general discussion?
- Why are they a therapist?
- What they believe their strengths are as a therapist
- How they work through their own issues
- How they protect your privacy
- Options for emergency or crisis treatment (if necessary)
- Session rates and rebates



Preparing to see your GP

- An understanding of what caused your condition
- How your condition may be related to factors such as your age, gender, lifestyle, current medications or health, etc
- How they can help you prevent your symptoms returning
- Other treatment options
- Techniques for talking to your loved ones about your issues so they can understand and buy in with your treatment
- Any literature to support your recovery and treatment plan

Be clear with what you need from a therapist. You need to feel comfortable with their treatment and with the results.

Session self-review

It is imperative that you feel comfortable with your healthcare professional. When you've had your session, consider a self-review by asking yourself:

- Did you feel relaxed with your therapist?
- Were you able to go at your own pace?
- Did your therapist understand your issue, or did they misinterpret it?
- Did they ask questions of you? Seek clarification?
- Did your conversation flow? Or was it awkward?
- Did you understand their response to your issues? Was it on your 'level'?
- Would you feel inclined towards telling this person all of your secrets?
- Do you understand their treatment plan?
- Do you want to go back?

Preparing to see your GP or other healthcare professional can be easier if you are organised and prepared to ask questions. Don't be afraid to take notes, and if your therapist doesn't seem like a good fit, don't be afraid to ask your GP for another referral. It's your life. Your health.

MindShift to a Better Place.

Copyright © The MindShift Foundation
A not-for-profit Australian organisation.

Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.