



Getting the Most from Mental Health Treatment

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

If you are struggling with anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, or any other mental health problem—and many of us do—what are the chances that professional mental health treatment will actually help you to feel better?

The chances are very good. Data shows that there's an 80% recovery rate over time among those who access treatment.

Sometimes it does take time to get better. That's because, like diabetes or high blood pressure, many types of mental health problems can be chronic.

So how can you maximize the benefits of mental health treatment and also reduce the frequency and duration of these relapses?

Here are six steps you can follow to ensure the best possible outcome from mental health treatment:

Seek treatment. This sounds obvious but many people choose to suffer in silence. About two-thirds of adults with mental health problems and 80% of children do not access professional treatment at all. This would be a mistake as it has been shown that treatment works.

So the first thing is to make sure you go for treatment.

But remember, this can be a little tricky. Sometimes it takes a couple of weeks to find a treatment provider. There are a limited number of mental health treatment providers and, in addition, you may have limits set by the type of insurance you have.

Interview Potential Therapists. When meeting with your therapist for the first time, whether in person or on the phone, be sure to ask what type of treatment he or she provides. Let the therapist know what type of problems you're struggling with and find out how what the therapist would do to help.

Basically, you want to match yourself with your therapist. Make sure it's a good fit. Do you feel comfortable with this therapist? Does he or she give you some sense of hope?

If you don't feel a basic connection, politely decline services from this therapist and find another. Often the therapist you were just talking to can make a good recommendation. Therapists understand this process and respect it.

Be Open. Once started with your chosen therapist, the key to getting the most help is for you to be open about everything. Be sure to share as much as you are comfortable with at first but, over

time, if you leave out keep pieces of information, the psychotherapy will be less effective. You may be dealing with depression but don't forget to tell the therapist about any issues you might have with substance use or abuse, or any history you have with emotional, physical or sexual abuse.

As you open yourself to the therapist, he or she can offer support and/or healing techniques for all the issues in your life. All of the issues are inter-related so it's best to work on changes in all areas.

Have Treatment Goals. To gain the most from your therapy, it's important to have treatment goals. Work these goals out with your therapist. Usually it's best to focus on one or two issues at a time and to keep track of your progress.

Also you need to be able to measure your progress and know when you've accomplished one of your goals. For measuring, you can make self-assessments. How do you feel? Have things changed? Are things better? But you should listen to outside observers as well. What does your therapist see? What does your wife, husband, children, or parents see? Sometimes they see positive changes where you do not. Sometimes too, they see continued problems where you don't. Just listen to them openly.

When you've accomplished one goal, there may be another goal to take its place. Stay on track with your goals, taking one step at a time.

Medications. There are many psychiatric medications that can help to relieve symptoms. You may benefit from one or more of these medications. Your therapist can help you decide if a medication might be beneficial. If so, you'll need to go to a physician or nurse practitioner for an assessment and a prescription.

Getting the right medication is sometimes a process of trial and error. You'll need to note how well the medication works for treating your symptoms, while also noting the side effects that it may cause. Working with your prescriber, you may need to fine tune the dosage or change to a different but similar medication.

But remember, medication alone is not the best answer. Research shows that the best outcomes are achieved for clients who combine ongoing mental health therapy with their psychiatric medications. The meds alone offer a quick improvement in symptoms but, to make this last, the therapy is also needed.

Keeping Appointments. This sounds obvious but many people take this too lightly. Many people think it's fine to skip one or two therapy sessions each month. But the more sessions you miss, the more you drift from your plan. The therapist is there to help you stay focused on your goals and on your progress. The therapist gives you reminders of what you're working on, and encouragement to follow through. The therapist helps to keep you on track.

What do you think? Do these guidelines sound helpful?

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