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Depressed and shy: Finding the courage to get help ^[1]

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,

The first phone call to a mental health professional's office can be stress-inducing, as it often represents the first step in being vulnerable and addressing an issue that may not be easy to discuss. However, making that call may also provide you with a sense of relief and hopefulness for the future. You've already taken the courageous steps of choosing to consult with a professional and attempting to prepare for the process. Read on for tips to help navigate that first call, as well as additional information on your treatment options.

While it may make you feel less anxious to prepare what you're going to say ahead of time, it's hard to say exactly how that first call will go. Different professionals may answer the phone depending on the setting. At group practices, mental health clinics, or medical centers, chances are a receptionist or other office staff member will be your first line of contact. If you call a provider in private practice, the provider may answer or you may reach their voicemail. If you choose to leave a voicemail, you could try simply saying, "Hello, my name is so-and-so and I'm calling to speak with someone about scheduling an appointment. I can be reached at..." Most mental health professionals will give you a call back within a few business days. If or when you speak with someone on the phone, you may even use the same line as you did on the voicemail to start the conversation ("Hello, my name is so-and-so and I am calling to speak with someone

about scheduling an appointment."). In either case, you may also be greeted initially by prompts that will direct you more specifically to a person that can help you make an appointment.

Every office will have its own way of getting some key information from you before scheduling the first appointment. The following are a few questions you may expect to answer on that first phone call:

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

You may also choose to ask some questions yourself, such as:

- 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?

Before you end the first call, you may want to discuss a few other topics, such as your general availability for appointments and preferences for certain characteristics in a mental health professional. If someone else answers the phone and you'd prefer to speak directly with a mental health professional, you can make that request. If the office or individual seems to be a good fit, the next step is often scheduling the first appointment. And luckily, there's no wrong way to do so. Perhaps you want to call other providers to investigate your options, or maybe you feel ready to schedule an appointment at that time. The choice is yours to make.

If you're struggling to find a mental health professional in your area who's a good fit [2], you have several options. There are online applications available, which can be tools for individuals dealing with a variety of health issues such as depression and anxiety. Using these apps, you can access a professional conveniently and discreetly by text, voice, or video call — often even at a moment's notice. While this option may be appealing to those more reluctant to communicate by phone or face-to-face, research on online and mobile therapy is limited, and its efficacy is essentially unknown. What might the potential downsides be? One disadvantage is that services involving only written communication don't allow for face-to-face visibility for the client and professional to notice body language and tone of voice. Ultimately, these applications aren't a perfect substitute for traditional treatment methods, and are often best used as a supplement to treatment or last resort if in-person treatment isn't an option. However, if you find that you're struggling to pick up the phone, speaking with a provider through one of these methods may help you feel more comfortable with seeking mental health care in person.

If you've pursued in-person and online options with no luck, all hope isn't lost. Students can likely make an appointment at their school's counseling department or mental health clinic. Student or not, anyone can visit the National Institute of Mental Health's Getting Help: Locate Services [3] website for more information on mental health service options. If you have health insurance, your plan may offer a list of providers and a procedure for connecting with services. You can find that

information on their website or by calling the company directly and asking for assistance.

Reaching out is often the first step in accessing mental health resources, and you're putting in the work to make that call an effective one. Keep in mind — treating depression is a process that takes time, effort, and courage.

With encouragement,

Alice!

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