



Getting Professional Help

Many trauma survivors benefit from talking to a mental health professional (psychologist, social worker, or psychiatrist), a priest, rabbi, or other member of the clergy, or a doctor or nurse. In *Getting Professional Help*, we provide information about: why you might consider talking to a professional; what happens when you talk to a skilled helper; when should you consider getting help; what are some of the things that might stop you from getting help; who are the different types of professionals that do this kind of work; and, how you might find a counselor. You will be able to consider the benefits as well as the drawbacks of talking to a professional counselor who understands trauma.

Introduction

The focus of these books is to help empower people to cope more effectively with traumatic life events. These e-books are built from solid scientific evidence. This evidence has shown that when people know what to expect, and learn ways to deal with the demands of recovering, they are able to more effectively manage traumatic stress and find ways to grow personally from the experience. It is also true that everyone has a limit, so it is critical to know what the signs are that point to being completely “upside down” when dealing with trauma and when to seek outside support or professional help.

The books in this series are:

1. *The Way Ahead*
2. *How to Get Support During Recovery*
3. *What You Tell Yourself Matters*
4. *Coping With Trauma Reminders*
5. *What Not to Do!*
6. *Getting Professional Help: Step by Step*
7. *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress.*

This book will help you to understand when to seek help from a professional counselor and how to do it. We hope you find it helpful.

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The Way Ahead

This book is designed for one thing and one thing only—as a practical guide to help you cope more effectively with an experience that has deeply affected your life, possibly turning it upside down. There is a series of seven books, each with its own focus on different aspects of trauma recovery.

Each book is a “pick up and go” workbook with specific exercises and tools to help you help yourself. I will be extremely practical and direct in this book. When people face life’s unpredictable tragedies, they do not have time for idle chat or psychobabble. We now turn to specific skills in learning how to seek professional help to aid you in your recovery.

Seeking Professional Help

We strongly recommend that you seek immediate counseling if you:

- 1) Are struggling to manage your day to day activities or responsibilities.**
- 2) Having a hard time taking care of your children or pets.**
- 3) Have increased your use of alcohol or street drugs to cope.**
- 4) Are thinking of hurting yourself or someone else in any way.**

Many trauma survivors benefit from talking to a mental health professional (psychologist, social worker, or psychiatrist), a priest, rabbi, or other member of the clergy, or a doctor or nurse. In this book, we provide information about: why you might consider talking to a professional; what happens when you talk to a skilled helper; when should you consider getting help; what are some of the things that might stop you from getting help; who are the different types of professionals that do this kind of work; and, how you might find a counselor. You will be able to consider the benefits as well as the drawbacks of talking to a professional counselor who understands trauma.



Why talk to a Professional Helper? Talking to a professional counselor could be important if you are having problems that do not seem to be improving over time, or if your problems are seriously affecting your ability to function every day. Many people find it is helpful to talk to an objective person after they have gone through a serious, life-changing event. It is somehow freeing not to have to worry about the other person. When someone talks to a family member or a friend this can also be quite helpful, but it is often more complicated. Professional counselors who know about traumatic stress can offer special treatment to reduce stress symptoms, depression, and other problems.

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Talking to a professional helper could also be useful to you if:

- There are some things you don't want to talk about with family or friends.
- Family or friends don't seem to know how to help you.
- Your stress reactions are not going away after about a month, or they are getting worse.
- This event has brought up other traumatic experiences in your life and you are feeling overwhelmed.
- You want another perspective on how to help yourself get better.

Think about the items on this list and mark the ones that you think might apply to you.

What happens in Professional Counseling?

When you seek help from a skilled professional in trauma counseling, you will review how the trauma has affected you, set some goals about changes you want to make or things you need to get done, learn about how trauma affects people, discover ways to improve your coping (including how to reduce any anxiety and tension), and learn ways to help you move forward through your trauma. A counselor can teach you many helpful techniques about how to relax, how to write about your experience, and how to distract yourself at difficult moments. All of these are helpful ways to deal with trauma.

Talking about the Trauma.



Most trauma survivors find it hard to talk about what happened, especially at first. In fact, many actively avoid talking about the trauma in order to avoid the feelings and upset that surface when talking about the experience. Talking to a professional counselor can make talking easier. Counselors learn ways to make it easier for people to talk about difficult things. A counselor, for example, knows how to encourage you to

talk and can help you find the words you need to be able to express what you are going through. One of the most important aspects of counseling is that it is confidential. This can help you share what you are experiencing. Knowing that no one else has to know what you are feeling or thinking other than the counselor may allow you to open up more.

How do I know if I should consider face-to-face counseling? Traumas affect people differently. You should consider treatment by a trained mental health professional if you are having significant distress. This means that you have been having a hard time for more than a month following the trauma, and that your symptoms are interfering with your life so much that you find it hard to function at home or at work.

However, all of us can benefit from seeing a skilled helper after experiencing a significant traumatic event—even if we are managing at home and at work. Seeing a counselor can provide new perspectives and help you find new meaning in what you have experienced.

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Many people think they have to be “falling apart” before they see a counselor. It doesn't have to be an emergency. Professionals who have training and expertise in working with trauma survivors can help you learn to manage your feelings and thoughts more effectively, feel more comfortable talking to people in your daily life, pursue your important goals, and focus on the future. In an essence, they can help you on your journey to recovery.

Keep in Mind. Many reactions such as feeling upset, struggling to put things into perspective, thinking a lot about the trauma are very common in the first week or two following a traumatic event. By themselves, these reactions do not indicate an urgent need to see a counselor. At first, you also may experience other difficulties getting through normal activities and responsibilities, like avoiding certain situations, feeling nervous, or having problems sleeping or eating.

If these reactions do not improve in the first days and weeks following a trauma, then it may be important to think about face-to-face counseling. If your symptoms get worse or last more than a month, you should find a professional to help you. Trauma treatment is quite effective.

Feeling Alone? Trauma is very personal and can make people feel very lonely and isolated. This is another reason to consider face-to-face counseling. You should strongly consider seeking help if you are feeling that people close to you are not able to provide you the support that you need or want. You might also find it helpful to talk to someone if you are feeling isolated or alone without close family or friends to help you. It is also possible that the specific trauma that you have experienced (such as a rape, and assault, or domestic violence) makes it difficult for you to talk to people close to you. A therapist can be quite helpful in this case.



Many people who would benefit from counseling don't seek it out. Why? It is a big step to seek out help from a counselor. Some people think it would feel strange to talk to someone outside the family or someone who isn't a friend. Others avoid seeking help because they think that they should be able to solve their problems on their own. It is also common for trauma survivors to avoid talking about what happened, especially if they are having a lot of symptoms related to the experience. Finally, people often do not know how to find a professional to help them.

Below we have provided you a place to write about why you might need to get help. First, list your thoughts about why talking to a counselor might help you. Then, write down why you would NOT consider getting help. Think about whether there are items on this list that are hurdles you could get over in order to help yourself recover.

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- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Remember... Seeking counseling should be seen as a sign of strength rather than weakness. Finding ways to help yourself is an important part of the recovery process. Talking to a counselor can help you to help yourself.

What might you get out of seeking professional help? What are some of the ways in which counseling might help you? The list below is meant to help you think about ways that counseling might help you. Circle the ones that really fit for you.

It might reduce my painful feelings about what happened and could improve my understanding of how I'm dealing with it.

It could reduce how often I think about the trauma help me move forward.

It might give me a new perspective on what has happened.

It could help my mood.

It might make me feel less alone and isolated.

It could help me find ways to talk to others about what has happened and how I'm doing.

It might make it easier for me to get into a routine again.

It could help me to get support that I need and do more things socially again.

It could teach me specific skills to help myself.

It might help me find meaning in what has happened.

If you are not sure whether to seek counseling, you might consider a “test” session with a therapist. Having a therapy session with someone doesn't mean you have committed yourself to seeing a therapist for an extended time. It is important for you to find someone who is right for you—someone who makes you feel comfortable.

Who provides counseling? There are several kinds of professionals trained to help you. Mental health professionals specialize in counseling people with problems, and some have studied how to best help people with trauma related difficulties like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other trauma-related problems. You might also benefit from talking to your spiritual guide such as your priest, rabbi, or other spiritual counselor. You might also find it easier to talk to your doctor or nurse. There are many different kinds of skilled helpers out there to help you.

There are many different types of professionals qualified to treat PTSD and other post-trauma problems. Licensed mental health professionals who say that they specialize in treating trauma should have training in the treatments that are proven to help trauma survivors. The two treatments that have shown success are cognitive behavioral therapy with exposure and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy

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(EMDR). Ask your therapist what approach he/she plans to use to help you recover. If you are not satisfied with the response, look for another professional.

There are four major types of therapists practicing around the country today. Here is a brief description of the qualifications for each type.

Clinical and Counseling Psychologist. These professionals have doctoral degrees from universities that specialize in the study of clinical, research, and educational psychology. These therapists have studied in programs approved by the American Psychological Association (APA). The APA is the organization that sets standards for the psychology profession. In addition to four years of course work, clinical psychologists must complete one year of supervised clinical training. After the fifth year of



training, clinical psychologists must have another one to two years of supervised clinical experience to be eligible to take the licensing exam. Psychologists receive their license after passing the exam, which is given by the American Board of Professional Psychology. Once they receive a license, a psychologist can practice psychotherapy without supervision. Although psychologists are doctors, they cannot prescribe medications. Some psychologists have specialized in treating individuals who have experienced a trauma.

Clinical Social Workers. These professionals have a master's degree or doctoral degree in social work. Graduate training for the master's level requires at least two years of schooling beyond the four years necessary for the undergraduate degree. To be licensed, clinical social workers must pass an exam given by the Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACSW). This license is called the Licensed Clinical Social Worker or LCSW. Again, if these individuals are specialists in treating trauma, they should have special training or supervision in cognitive behavioral therapy with exposure or EMDR.

Psychiatrists. Psychiatrists attend medical school and have a medical degree (MD). As with other medical specialties, psychiatrists participate in three to four year residency training in psychiatry after they complete four years of medical school. Child psychiatrists must complete at least one year of concentrated clinical experience with children. Board certified psychiatrists have also passed a written and oral examination given by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology. Psychiatrists, like all medical doctors, prescribe medications. Some also provide psychotherapy. Medications such as antidepressants called Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors or SSRI's (Prozac, Paxil, Effexor, etc.) often are prescribed to help people struggling with depression. Certain



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SSRI's may be helpful for treating posttraumatic stress symptoms. You should consult with your psychiatrist about the effectiveness of these different medications.

Other Practitioners. This includes individuals like Pastoral Counselors, who may also be of service to trauma survivors. Certified Pastoral Counselors have at least a master's or doctoral degree in Divinity or a closely related field and have completed clinical training. Many states do not have a separate designation for pastoral counseling licenses, so these counselors may have licenses in marriage and family therapy or another specialty.

What are the Major Treatments for PTSD?

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) focuses on the way your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors combined are all related and how to change them to make your recovery easier. **Exposure therapy** is a specific CBT technique that uses careful, repeated talking about the trauma (exposure) in a safe therapy situation. This exposure helps the survivor face the fear and distress that was overwhelming during the trauma and gain control again. **Cognitive therapy** involves examining and rethinking distressing beliefs about the trauma and its effects. Trauma survivors sometimes think, "I'm going crazy," or, "I'm to blame for what happened," which often troubles them and interferes with their recovery. CBT for trauma also includes learning skills for coping with anxiety (such as calming breathing and relaxation), managing anger, and communicating effectively with people. The book called "What You Tell Yourself Matters" is designed to help with this type of problem.

Medications can reduce the anxiety, depression, and sleep problems that are often experienced with trauma recovery. In some cases, medication may help relieve the distress and emotional numbness caused by trauma memories. Several kinds of antidepressant drugs have contributed to patient improvement in most (but not all) studies, and some other types of drugs are showing promise for treating trauma. At this time, no particular drug has emerged as "just right" for treating posttraumatic stress symptoms. However, medication is clearly useful for some people in providing relief for their symptoms.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a treatment for traumatic memories that involves some exposure therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy combined with techniques that allow the person to focus on a specific external stimulus (eye movements, hand taps, and sounds) while being briefly exposed to trauma memories. Although this therapy seems a little unique, the scientific support for its positive effects is quite strong.

Group treatment is often helpful because trauma survivors are able to share traumatic experiences in the presence of other survivors. Group discussion can help members to understand their trauma better and gain hope and coping ideas from each other. The

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recommended therapy is to combining individual therapy to assist in processing the trauma with group support.

Brief psychodynamic psychotherapy focuses on the emotional conflicts caused by the traumatic event, particularly as they relate to the survivor's early life experiences. By retelling the traumatic event to a calm, empathic, compassionate, and nonjudgmental therapist, the survivor can improve self-esteem, develop effective ways of thinking and coping, and learn to deal more successfully with intense emotions. This treatment combined with CBT or EMDR can help to provide a deeper understanding of one's life. It is a useful treatment for examining how our early life experiences and current experiences are related to one another and how those experiences influence our relationships.

How to Find a Counselor

There are several ways to find a counselor. Below we list several options. If one doesn't quite work, do not give up. Sometimes it takes a little time to find the right person to help you. When you do, it is invaluable.

One option is to call your doctor's office or ask friends if they can recommend a mental health provider. This can be difficult if you do not want to tell them what is happening. Think about how you would describe why you are asking for a recommendation. You might practice giving a vague answer to this question. For example, you might say that you want to work on self-improvement and want to work with someone that they would recommend to their own family member.

Your employer might also have a list of professional counselors that they will provide. This can be difficult if the list has 30 names. How do you narrow it down? We recommend that you have specific questions that you can ask when contacting these individuals. For example, how much experience do they have with helping people cope with trauma? What therapy do they practice when helping people? (If they say, "Oh, I just do it my own way" you should go the other WAY!).

Some employers have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that can be very helpful. Employee Assistance Programs typically offer three to five sessions free of charge. After those sessions, you can decide if you want more assistance beyond these initial sessions. Your human resources person can help you to contact the EAP.

Some local mental health services are listed in the phone book in the blue Government pages. Look in the "County Government Offices" section for the county where you live, then search for a "Human Services (Dept. of)" or "Department of Human Services" section. In that section, look for listings under "Mental Health." Some states have non-

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profit mental health centers. Look for them in the yellow pages under “Mental Health Providers.”

Also in the yellow pages, is a list of mental health professionals under the following titles: “Psychologists,” “Counselors,” “Social Workers,” and “Psychotherapists.” Many medical insurance plans also have coverage for mental health. Typically, they have a list of providers that you must use if they are going to cover a percentage of the cost. Your insurance provider can give you the list or direct you to that list. Again, you will want to “interview” the providers to determine their experience with helping trauma survivors.

In addition to any insurance you might have to help you with the cost, there are community mental health agencies and providers that offer lower cost services often depending on your ability to pay. You can find these services through your doctor’s office, through your local hospital, or through your county’s Department of Human Services, as described above. Finally, you can call the National Center for Victims of Crime, which has a toll-free information and referral service at **1-800-FYI-CALL**. This organization has a listing of more than 6,700 agencies throughout the country that support crime victims.

Online Resources

Anxiety Disorders Association of America offers a referral network of professional therapists, as well as a self-help group network at www.adaa.org (click on “Find a Therapist.”)

The Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy (AABT) is a professional organization that maintains a database of CBT therapists at www.aabt.org (click on “The Public,” then, “Find A Therapist.”)



The National Institute of Mental Health - Anxiety Disorders has published an extensive list of mental health organizations to help the consumer find more information about anxiety disorders and related issues, as well as to obtain referrals for specialists in different geographical areas at www.nimh.gov (click on “Health & Outreach,” then “Anxiety Disorders.”)

The Sidran Institute offers a referral list of professional therapists, as well as a fact sheet on how to choose a therapist for PTSD and dissociative disorders at www.sidran.org.

The National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) has a website with information on advocacy for those with mental illness, including affiliates who provide family support groups in different states at www.nami.org.

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About.com's trauma resource page offers a comprehensive listing of information, resources, links, and support groups on a wide array of topics related to trauma, particularly incest and child abuse, at www.about.com (enter “Mental Health” in the search field).

Facts for Health offers a referral database of clinicians who have completed a continuing education course on PTSD or clinicians who have been identified by the directors of the Madison Institute of Medicine as being specialists in PTSD at www.factsforhealth.org.