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Canadian Mental
Health Association
British Columbia
Mental health for all

tips for

working with your doctor for mental illnesses

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Talking to your health professional about a mental illness is a very important first step. It's the beginning of your journey to wellness. Once you've received a diagnosis, you and your health professional will need to build a treatment plan that works for you. This is vital—if your treatment plan doesn't address your own needs and concerns, you may not see the benefits in areas of your life that are most important to you. To work with your doctor, you'll need to take an active role in your care. In our companion tip sheet on dealing with a mental health diagnosis, you learned about the importance of learning about your mental illness. Now, you'll use the information you've learned to make decisions around your treatment plan, and later on, you'll use your treatment to help you manage symptoms and other problems with greater independence.

Treatment for a mental illness is very important. It may be easy to believe that it's not serious and that you can just "get over it" on your own. It may also be easy to think that nothing will ever help you feel better, and to wonder why you should bother at all. But like many other health problems, it won't

just go away on its own. Left untreated, a mental illness may get worse, lead to other health problems or last for a long time. With treatment, you may start to feel better relatively soon. Deciding to seek help for a mental illness is an important first step on your path to wellness.

This is the first module in a three-part series. The other two modules are "Dealing with a mental illness diagnosis" and "Preventing relapse of mental illnesses."



what mental health professionals might I see?

You will likely encounter different mental health professionals on your recovery journey. They have different kinds of training and offer different services and supports. Here are the professionals you might see:

- **Family doctors** or general practitioners (also called GPs) are medical doctors. They have general medical training, and may have experience in dealing with mental illnesses. They are often your first step in navigating the mental health system. Family doctors can diagnose mental illnesses, prescribe medication and refer you to specialized services, like the professionals listed below. Some family doctors even have training in talk therapies like cognitive-behavioural therapy.
- **Psychiatrists** are also medical doctors. They have general medical training as well as specialized training in psychiatry. They can diagnose mental illnesses, prescribe medication and provide different talk therapies.
- **Registered psychologists** can give a diagnosis and provide different therapies, but they don't prescribe medication.
- **Counsellors** (such as Registered Clinical Counsellors or Canadian Certified Counsellors) provide a clinical assessment, prevention strategies, and therapies.
- **Social Workers** assess, refer or provide counselling to people living with mental illnesses or people who have difficulties with everyday living skills. They often work as a "case manager" on mental health teams or at mental health centres, which means that they help people solve problems and connect people to different resources.
- **Employee Assistance Plan (EAP)** Professionals have various forms of training. They provide counselling through workplace insurance plans.
- **Registered nurses** are medically trained caregivers. They work throughout the mental health system and can help with many different health concerns, like monitoring medication. Registered Psychiatric Nurses have special training and specifically care for people living with mental illnesses.
- **Occupational therapists** help people improve their daily living skills. They often work within mental health teams.
- **Vocational rehabilitation therapists** help people return to their job or find a new job. They may help people upgrade their skills, help people navigate accommodations at their workplace, and help people create a build career plans.



Good communication with your doctor allows you to share in the key decisions about your treatment plan or strategy.

How do I talk with these health professionals?

The most effective way to take charge of your health is through shared decision-making. This means that you are an equal partner in the decisions that affect your health. It means taking an active role in finding the treatment approach that works best for you. You may find you want to be very involved, or you may prefer less direct involvement. And your role may vary depending on the stage of your illness you're at: whether you've been recently diagnosed or whether you have a lot of experience with your illness. Regardless of your preferred level of involvement, you do need to be involved to some degree.

Taking an active role in your treatment requires a number of different skills. First of all, it means you need to be able to communicate clearly with your doctor or other health professional. You'll need to speak with them in an informed way about what you think the problem is, how it affects your daily life and what you expect to get out of treatment. Good communication with your doctor allows you to share in the key decisions about your treatment plan or strategy.

Once you've developed your initial strategy, your next role is to help monitor the results. For this, you'll need to know when and how to measure success. For example, you'll need to know how long it may take for the medication

to start working or how long it may take to see results from psychotherapy. You also need a clear idea of what impacts you hope treatment will have on your daily life. This helps you measure success against these expectations.

When you have an idea of what you hope to achieve, you need to be able to tell your doctor or mental health care professional what has been happening between visits. If necessary, you may need to discuss adjustments to your plan—such as changing a medication dose, trying a different medication or trying a different treatment approach altogether. It may take a while to find the approach—or combination of approaches—that works best for you.

Remember that you're doing all this work while you're dealing with a mental illness. A mental illness may affect the way you interact with your health professional. Some mental illnesses can affect your memory and concentration. That's why it's helpful to bring lists of questions in with you, or take notes, or give yourself reminders of appointments. You can also take along any self-assessments, like online self-tests, you've completed. A mental illness may also make you feel hopeless (what's the point of getting help?) and ashamed (I'm embarrassed to tell my doctor how bad it is...), which is why bringing a loved one or a self-test printout to appointments can help you too.

Shared decision-making can be viewed as a series of steps that lead to an effective treatment plan for you. These steps are:

- **Defining the problem.** Your role is explaining the problem in your own terms.
- **Setting goals.** Deciding what the goals of treatment will be, or deciding what will happen as a result of treatment.
- **Making decisions.** Developing and deciding on treatment strategies. You'll want to balance the advice of the mental health professional with your own expectations and priorities for treatment.
- **Monitoring results.** Evaluating whether strategies are working, and re-assessing the treatment plan as needed.



Step One: Defining the problem

When you go to see a mental health professional, they will talk with you to assess your problem. Your job is to give as much information as you can in your own words to give the doctor the full picture of what's going on. Your doctor will also need to know what you've experienced in the past and what treatments you've tried in the past.

It's also important to talk about how your mental health is affecting different areas of your life, such as your job, your home life and your relationships. For example, do you have a hard time concentrating at work? Do you spend less time with family and friends? Do you feel like you don't have the energy for social events? Are you less certain that life is still worth living? This is valuable information for your mental health professional. It will also help you set goals in the next step, as your treatment plan should help you make changes in the way your mental health affects your daily life.

It's useful to think of these issues ahead of time and write down key information. You can bring this to your appointment to help remind yourself of what you want to discuss. Some people find it helpful to bring trusted family members or friends to explain the changes they've noticed.

“It's important to talk about how your mental health is affecting different areas of your life, such as your job, your home life and your relationships.”

Step Two: Setting goals and making decisions

Before you decide on a treatment strategy, you need to think about what you want to change. Your eventual satisfaction with your treatment plan will depend on whether it helps you deal with the way a mental illness impacts your life.

Your sense of priorities may be different from those of your health care professional, so you will need to be able to explain what your priorities are and why they're important.

When you're working these issues out, you'll need to be open to advice from your health professional or support network, and open to consider new information and perspectives that may change your ideas. The ideal situation is one where you can communicate your own concerns, list new information and perspectives, and then come together and agree on a strategy of what goals to address first.

Once you've decided on some of the issues you can realistically address, you then need to decide on some concrete goals that you plan to achieve. Concrete goals are specific enough that you can picture what they will look like and mean in your daily life. For example, if you've become more socially isolated, a goal may be to become more socially active. To achieve this, you need to be more specific. A concrete goal out of this might be to phone one friend in the next week.

How do I set concrete goals?

Ideally, your goals should be SMART. That is:

- **Specific**—how exactly will you do it?
- **Measurable**—how will you measure progress in your goal?
- **Achievable**—does your goal seem too hard to reach?
- **Realistic**—knowing yourself, are you willing and able to put in the work to do it?
- **Timely**—when do you want to achieve your goal by?

That means your “goal statement” should state:

- What you want to achieve and who is responsible
- How much you are going to change
- When you're going to achieve it
- How you'll measure whether you've achieved it or not.

Step Three: Making decisions

Now that you've decided what you want to change, the next step is figuring out how you're going to change it. In some cases, this will involve helping to choose a medication that's right for you. In other cases, it may involve counselling approaches like cognitive-behavioural therapy. Or it may be a combination of medication and counselling. You may also benefit from information or referrals to community resources like case management, supported housing, supported employment or income assistance programs. Finally, you'll need to decide on a plan for dealing with your illness outside of your doctor's office.

Deciding on a treatment plan that you can live with involves different parts:

- Considering the evidence
- Considering your own preferences and values
- Considering other people's experiences

Considering the evidence

When you consider an option for treatment, you need to know some basic facts about the treatment. You need to find out how the approach works, how long it will take to work, what the potential risks and benefits may be, and whether it's an appropriate choice for you. Here are some questions to keep in mind when you consider the evidence, whether it came from your doctor or you came across it on your own:

- What are the intervention options? What could the risks or benefits look like in your life? What are the chances that the risks or benefits might occur, when might they occur, and how long might they last?
- What might happen if you do nothing? What are the possible negative outcomes?
- How do the benefits and harm weigh up to you? What do you want to get out of treatment? What risks are you willing to take?
- Do I have enough information to make an informed choice? Are there any treatment options you haven't considered?

If you're considering information you heard from a friend or information from the media, the Internet or a book, check out our tip sheet "Evaluating Mental Health and Substance Use Information".

Considering your own preferences and values

Making a decision involves more than weighing information. It also involves thinking about your own attitudes—including your values and fears.

You will need to consider all the things that influence your thinking, including your personal values, emotions and attitudes about your illness and potential treatments. For example, some people have concerns about medications, like concerns about becoming too reliant on medication or fear of side effects. Before making a decision one way or the other, you should reflect carefully on which of the issues apply to you and have an open discussion with your mental health professional so that you can address your own particular concerns. This helps you make an informed choice.





It may be helpful to look at other people's experiences. It can provide a lot of valuable information, and can often provide reassurance.

Your culture and family background will also play a role in how you approach treatment. It may also affect the way you think about a mental illness and what can help it. It's important that your doctor understands your point of view. It's also important you talk about other treatments you're considering, as there may be risks in combining some treatments. Doctors are highly valued in most cultures. But asking questions and sharing concerns is not a sign of disrespect. It's a sign you want to learn more from their knowledge.

Considering other people's experiences

It may be helpful to look at other people's experiences. It can provide a lot of valuable information, and can often provide reassurance. It's best to talk to several people, not just one or two, to get a variety of perspectives. Everyone's situation is unique, but there are often things in common. Support groups are a good place to learn from others. You can also find stories of other people's experiences in books and online.

Step Four: Monitoring results

Once you start a particular treatment approach, it's important to monitor whether it works in relation to your goals. Remember, the success of your treatment isn't just about symptoms and side effects. You'll also need to evaluate the success of the treatment in terms of its success in minimizing the impact of your illness on your life, and your ability to function in settings and roles that are important to you.

To play an active role in monitoring your treatment, you'll need a sound understanding of your illness and of potential side effects to watch for. You may need help telling the difference between a symptom of your illness and a side effect of your treatment because they may look the same. There are many tools to help you track your progress, such as diaries and charts. We've included one here and on the HeretoHelp website, but you can use others you like better. You can even find software, apps and online resources to help you track your progress.



talking to your health professionals

Talking to health professionals may be intimidating, but you and your health professional do need to work together. Remember, your doctor can't provide the best information if they don't know what the problem is, and they can't offer the best-suited treatment options if they don't know your goals or concerns. Here is a checklist to help keep you on track during your appointments.

Before the appointment

Plan—Think of what you want to tell your doctor or what you want to learn from your health professional at this appointment. Decide what is the most important to you. If you have particular questions, write them down. You can bring your list to the appointment. If you take medication, including over-the-counter medication, plan to bring it with you.

During the appointment

- ☐ **Report**—Tell your doctor what you want to talk about during this appointment
- ☐ **Exchange information**—Make sure you tell the doctor what's wrong. It may be helpful to bring in a self-test you've completed or a diary of symptoms. Remember to explain how your problem affects your day-to-day life. You can bring a loved one with you, and they can help describe changes they've noticed.
- ☐ **Participate**—Talk with your doctor about the different ways to handle your health problem. Make sure you understand the positive and negative features of your choices. Ask as many questions as you need.
- ☐ **Agree**—Be sure that you and your doctor agree on a treatment plan that you can live with.
- ☐ **Repeat**—Tell your doctor what you think you will need to take care of the problem.

Adapted from the Institute for Healthcare Communication's PREPARE program at www.healthcarecomm.org

In the short term, the purpose of using these monitoring tools and approaches is to get a general sense of whether your treatment strategies are working as well as you think they should. They can also help track other factors that influence your mental illness, like your stress levels or the amount of sleep you get in a night. You can then communicate with your doctor, so that if need be, you can reassess the treatment strategies and attempt to figure out a better one. In the early stages of developing a treatment strategy, you should meet fairly regularly with your mental health professional to monitor your progress and come up with different strategies, if necessary.

Remember to be patient. In some cases, it can take a number of tries to find an approach that works. This is a normal, although frustrating, part of the journey. If nothing seems to work, it's important to make sure that your diagnosis is correct, or see if another problem is making your mental health harder to manage. For some people, the barrier to finding an approach that works is not a misdiagnosis, but low expectations on the part of the mental health professional. If you feel like you should be feeling better but your mental health professional is unwilling to try different options, you should consider asking for a second opinion or looking for someone who may be able to help you better.

It is important to maintain hope in situations where nothing seems to work. If you and your mental health professional take a systematic approach to exploring different options, the chances of finding the right approach are quite high. In the meantime, you need to keep trying different options until you find an answer that helps you live successfully with your illness.

Sticking with your treatment plan

Once you've arrived at a treatment plan that works, it's important to stick with it. This isn't always easy, and you may have to think about some of the issues in advance. For example, if you don't feel comfortable taking medication for a long period of time, it may be tempting to quit taking medication when you start to feel better. Unfortunately, this can lead to a relapse or other problems.

“Remember to be patient. In some cases, it can take a number of tries to find an approach that works.”

If your treatment plan isn't working for you — for whatever reason — it's important to have an honest discussion with your health care professional. This is especially important if you want to stop taking medication. Suddenly stopping a psychiatric medication can be uncomfortable or even dangerous. Your doctor can help you re-evaluate your treatment plan and move to a different strategy safely.

It may be more helpful to think of these issues in terms of managing your health rather than “compliance” or “adherence,” which is what health professionals call sticking with your treatment. You may want to think about how your treatment plan can help you manage a mental illness, rather than wonder how long you'll need to take medication or wonder how long you'll need to see your therapist.

working with your doctor for mental illnesses



Activity: Tracking your progress

Tracking of your mental health every day is a good way to see how a illness affects your day-to-day life. It will show you and your doctor or mental health professional how well treatment is working. It can also help you remember how you felt between doctor's visits, so you can give a better picture of the situation.

Under "My markers," list "markers" that show you how well you feel. These markers should show both good health and poor health. For example, sleep is a common marker for many people. Getting enough sleep may be a sign of good health, and being unable to sleep may be a sign of poor health. Other markers might include:

- Mood
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Energy levels
- Appetite
- Strength of delusions or hallucinations
- Strength of obsessions
- Strength of compulsions or time spent on compulsions
- Number of panic attacks

You will also need to create a rating system for some markers. For example, you might rate your mood on a scale of one to five. It doesn't matter how you rate your markers, as long as it's consistent!

Under "My treatments," list your treatments. It may include medications, therapies and alternative treatments. Remember to track medications that you only take "as needed."

Below is a sample chart. In this case, it tracks markers of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Mood, overall anxiety, energy, strength of obsessions and strength of compulsions are rated on a scale of one to five.

My Markers	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
mood	3	3	2	3	3	4	2
overall anxiety	4	4	4	4	2	2	3
energy	2	3	3	3	3	4	2
sleep	7 hrs	7.5 hrs	7.5 hrs	7 hrs	6 hrs	6 hrs	7 hrs
strength of obsessions	4	4	3	4	3	2	3
strength of compulsions	4	3	3	3	2	2	3
My treatments							
Venlafaxine (daily)	75 mg	75 mg	75 mg	75 mg	75 mg	75 mg	75 mg
Clonazepam (as needed)	0.25 mg	0.5 mg					
CBT	30 mins	30 mins		1 hr		30 mins	

This chart is blank because you'll need to decide what signs or symptoms to monitor. You signs or symptoms may depend on the illness and the way it affects you.

My Markers	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
My treatments							

working with your doctor for mental illnesses

where do I go from here?

Your doctor or mental health professional can recommend resources in your community. In addition to professional resources, you may find non-professional support helpful.

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for more info sheets on mental illnesses and other mental health topics, self-tests and personal stories. You can also find the info sheets, "Dealing with a Mental Illness Diagnosis" and "Preventing Relapse from a Mental Illness."

Support groups

Support groups are an important way to find support and information. They may help you feel less alone and more connected, even if you haven't told many others about your diagnosis. You can find support groups in your community through mental health organizations listed below. For more on choosing the right support group for you, see the info sheet, "Picking the Support Group that's Right for You" at www.heretohelp.bc.ca.

AnxietyBC: Visit www.anxietybc.com or call 604-525-7566. AnxietyBC provides information and resources on anxiety disorders.

BC Schizophrenia Society: Visit www.bcscs.org or call 1-888-888-0029 (toll-free in BC) or 604-270-7841 (in Greater Vancouver). BCSS provides information and resources on schizophrenia.

Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division: Visit www.cmha.bc.ca or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver). CMHA provides information and resources on mental health and mental disorders.

Centre for Addictions Research of BC: Visit www.carbc.ca for substance use resources and information. For referrals to service providers, contact the Alcohol and Drug Referral Service at 1-800-663-1441 (toll-free in BC) or 604-660-9382 (in Greater Vancouver).

FORCE Society for Kids Mental Health: Visit www.forcesociety.com or call 1-855-887-8004 (toll-free in BC) or 604-878-3400 (in the Lower Mainland). The F.O.R.C.E. raises the awareness and need for early intervention for the mental health of children and youth and assists families in finding information and help.

Jessie's Legacy Program, Family Services of the North Shore: Visit www.familyservices.bc.ca or call 1-888-988-5281 (toll-free in BC) or 604-988-5281 ext 204 (in Greater Vancouver). FSNS provides eating disorders prevention education, resources and support for BC youth, families, educators and professionals.

Mood Disorders Association of BC: Visit www.mdabc.net or call 604-873-0103.

Understanding Psychiatric Medications: The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Ontario offers guides for four different kinds of psychiatric medications: antidepressants, antipsychotics, mood stabilizers and benzodiazepines. You can find these guides online at www.camh.net.

Reclaiming Your Power During Medication Appointments: Visit www.power2u.org/articles/selfhelp/reclaim.html for the article, "Reclaiming Your Power During Medication Appointments" from the National Empowerment Center. It describes how to think about medication and work with health professionals as you work towards your treatment goals.

This info sheet has been adapted from an older resource from BC Partners and HeretoHelp: Macnaughton, E. (2003). "Module 3: Becoming an Active Partner in Treatment: Shared Decision-Making." Depression Toolkit: Information and Resources for Effective Self-Management of Depression. Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division.

This info sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.