
Questions for Your Practitioners

See www.OnwardMentalHealth.com (Resources) for an array of integrative mental health material including the latest version of this monograph, extracted from our book, *Choices in Recovery*.



We need complete trust and a strong rapport with our practitioners. Trust is established when we can have frank and informed dialogue, where all aspects of mental healthcare are open for discussion.

Dialogue is a two-way street in which those with mental health issues and their loved ones should provide important information, ask important questions, and have their questions answered.

This section suggests how to prepare for dialogue with practitioners, offering questions you may want to ask and ways to determine whether a practitioner might be a good fit.

Preparing for practitioner dialogue. A little preparation before meeting with practitioners goes a long way. Appointments are often short, so preparing helps us get the most out of the meeting. Consider the following:

- Review the brief *Skill in Advocacy* section in *Choices in Recovery*, which can help you enter the dialogue in the right frame of mind. Be self-confident, inquisitive, respectful and purposeful.
- Think through what you want to get out of the meeting. Come prepared with specific questions. (See below.) Write the questions down, so you don't forget. The practitioner will appreciate your preparation, since it ensures the meeting will be productive and efficient.
- Come prepared with information to share with the practitioner. Clearly express what you are currently experiencing. Bring relevant mental health history and your current recovery plan.

The first set of questions will help you select your team of practitioners. Consider the following questions and add to them prior to your first meeting. The answers you get will help you determine whether a practitioner is right for you.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR PRACTITIONERS EARLY IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP

- What types of mental health services do you offer in your practice?
- How do you define recovery? Do you find that people recover from mental health issues? Do your patients usually recover?
- What diagnosis seems to fit my situation? How confident are you in that?
- Do you think I can recover from this?
- What therapies work for your patients who have my diagnosis?
- Can physical problems—perhaps allergies, gastrointestinal problems, toxins, pathogens, or others—cause my symptoms? If so, what tests do you run to look for them?
- Can trauma and stress cause my symptoms? If so, how do you check for those?
- What treatment options are usually best for someone with my diagnoses? Do you offer all of these? If not all, what do you offer? Can you give me referrals to the others?
- Talk to me about psychiatric meds for people with my diagnosis. Which are the best? How well do they work? How serious are the side effects? Is withdrawal from those drugs difficult? How long do your patients typically stay on meds? Do you usually start at low doses or high doses? How do you determine dosage?
- How well do non-drug approaches work? How do they stack up against meds?

- How do we handle payment for your services? Do you take insurance? If so, which insurances?
- How often will I have appointments?
- Is it possible to have a phone consultation with you if I need it?
- Thank you very much for your time.

You ask and answer the following questions yourself, to evaluate your initial meeting with each practitioner.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF AFTER MEETING WITH THE PRACTITIONER:

- Did the practitioners ask you detailed questions about your symptoms, medical history, family history, and other aspects related to what you are experiencing? Did they listen carefully? Were they friendly and understanding? Did they seem to respect you?
- Did the practitioner give you adequate time to ask questions? Did you feel rushed? Were all your questions answered satisfactorily?
- Did the practitioner give you options for therapies and respect your self-determination and choices?
- Did the practitioner suggest non-drug options? Was this an important part of the recommendations to you?
- Did the practitioner give a balanced perspective on psychiatric drugs?
- Did the practitioner offer any non-drug therapies for use with drugs?
- Did the practitioner indicate that withdrawing from drug use is normal and part of a long-term plan?
- Did the practitioner genuinely seem to believe that you would recover?
- Did the practitioner suggest running appropriate tests to try to determine potential biomedical causes of your situation? (See separate document on biomedical test protocols)
- Did you feel you could develop trust and rapport with the practitioner?

Reflect on your responses to these questions. Think carefully about whether this is a good practitioner for you. Typically, the more of these questions you can answer in the affirmative, the more aligned the practitioner is with the emerging mental health paradigm—and with you.

Unless you are subject to legal issues that curtail your self-determination (such as being underage or on court-ordered therapy), you have the choice of whether to accept your practitioners' recommended care.

The last set of questions helps you understand the treatments your practitioners are recommending.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR PRACTITIONERS WHEN THEY PRESCRIBE TREATMENT

- What therapies and approaches do you recommend for my situation?
- Are there any reasonable non-drug alternatives?
- How confident are you that your recommended approaches will work for me?
- For drugs...
 - How well do the drugs compare to placebo in clinical trials?
 - Typically, what percentage of symptoms are relieved by these drugs?
 - What are the typical drug side effects? What percentage of people typically have side effects?
 - What are the short-term and long-term risks of using these drugs?
 - How did you determine the drug dosage for me?
 - How do we determine the *minimum effective dosages* for these drugs to balance their benefits with their side effects and risks? Do you advocate a “start low and go slow” approach to drug dosing?

- What evidence is there that shows that the specific combination of drugs work safely and effectively together? Have they been studied in combination in clinical trials?
- Am I on any drugs that have the potential of being inappropriate for me? Should we be considering deprescribing to lower dosages or eliminate any drugs?
- How long do you think I will need to be on this drug/therapy? Do you think you will wean me off it after a while? Are there any withdrawal problems?