

Part 3

**Surviving and Thriving
as You Look Ahead**

Chapter 7

How to Know Whether You Need Help from a Therapist

It can be very difficult to decide whether you need professional help to recover from your trauma. You might feel that you should be able to handle things on your own or that talking to someone means you are not a strong person. You might also be worried that talking about your trauma in treatment will actually make your symptoms worse. There are a few key things to remember. A good therapist will let you set the pace of treatment, and will not force you discuss things you are not ready for. Also, evidence-based treatments are built on your developing good coping skills before you delve into trauma-related memories. Finally, take a good look at the way you think about emotional strength. Sure, it's important to try to tackle your own problems. The sense that you can manage your feelings and emotions well (a sense of *self-efficacy*) is a key part of healing. But it's also important to know when you need to reach out for some help. Emotional strength is about leaning to cope on your own, and also about learning how (and when) to lean on others. Therapy can be a good opportunity to learn both aspects of emotional strength—independence and reliance on those you trust.

Do You Need Professional Help?

One of the best ways to determine if you should seek therapy is to consider how much your symptoms are interfering with your daily life. For example, are you having trouble at school

or work? Are you having difficulty forming close relationships with people? If you feel overwhelmed with sadness or if you've ever had thoughts about hurting yourself or ending your life, you should seek therapy. If you are dealing with feelings of rage and have thought about seriously hurting another person, you should also seek therapy. A trained professional can help you to find ways to deal with those feelings. You should also get help if you are using alcohol or drugs (prescription or street drugs) to cope with your symptoms. Although substance use helps in the short term to numb you to feelings of sadness or anxiety, in the long term it simply makes it more difficult to function from day to day. For example, although drinking several drinks every evening may help you cope with anxiety and help you to fall asleep, this same behavior almost always has a downside. You might find that you wake up very easily in the middle of the night, and that the anxiety you suffer when you are sober is even worse.

If you experience periods of serious *dissociation*, you should also seek professional help. Dissociation can include feeling strongly detached from your body, emotionally numbness, or having significant difficulty remembering things. Perhaps you suffer from flashbacks or painful memories that are so intense that you lose long periods of time. On a related note, you may have extreme difficulty concentrating or sleeping, and this might be affecting your ability to work, go to school, or have relationships. A trained professional can help you work on these types of symptoms. They are difficult to tackle on your own.

In general, a good way to figure out if you need therapy is to take a look at how you are functioning on a day-to-day basis. For example, are you able to go to work and school every day? When you are there, are you able to focus and concentrate? Do you have close relationships? Do you struggle to get close to people and deal with significant periods of irritability, sadness, or anger? If you feel like your work and personal life is being significantly impacted by the aftermath of trauma, you should seriously consider talking to a mental health professional. You can use the worksheet that follows (worksheet 28) to help you decide if you need more help. The worksheet can also help you start a conversation with a therapist about which symptoms bother you the most and where to focus your discussion.

Worksheet 28: Should I Seek Therapy?

Purpose: To ask yourself some key questions to help you decide if you need mental health treatment.

Instructions: Consider the questions below. If you answer yes to any of them, you should strongly consider contacting a professional for more help in working on your symptoms and developing the life you want.

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| Do you use substances including alcohol or drugs (prescription or street drugs) to help you cope? | Yes | No |
| Do you have serious thoughts about hurting yourself? | Yes | No |
| Do you have self-harming thoughts on a regular basis? | Yes | No |
| Do you have a specific plan about how you will act on self-harming thoughts? | Yes | No |
| Do you have serious thoughts about hurting someone else? | Yes | No |
| Do you have thoughts of hurting someone else on a regular basis? | Yes | No |
| Do you have a specific plan about how you will act on thoughts of hurting someone else? | Yes | No |
| Do you have significant periods when you feel out of touch with your body or your thoughts? | Yes | No |
| Do you have considerable difficulty experiencing any feelings or emotions? | Yes | No |
| Do you have significant trouble concentrating when you need to? | Yes | No |
| Do you feel that you are unable to function in an important domain of your life—for example, at work, school, or home, or in your relationships with people? | Yes | No |

Finding the Right Therapist

Perhaps you have decided that seeking therapy is your next step. Remember that not all therapists have training in dealing with PTSD and trauma. Therapists have varying levels of training as well as varying backgrounds.

- Psychiatrists have a medical degree (MD). They can prescribe medications and are sometimes trained in psychotherapy. Not all are trained specifically in PTSD or trauma.
- Licensed clinical psychologists have a PhD or PsyD degree. In most states they cannot prescribe medication. Most are trained in psychotherapy, but not all are trained specifically in how to treat trauma or PTSD.
- Licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) can have bachelors (BA/BS), masters (MA/MS) or doctoral (DSW, PhD) degrees. Some are trained in psychotherapy and others focus on case management. Not all are trained specifically in how to treat trauma or PTSD.
- Some states license providers who have a bachelors or associates degree. Most of these providers are not specifically trained in treating PTSD or trauma.

Here are some tips to use when trying to find a therapist who is trained and experienced in treating PTSD and other effects of trauma.

- Ask supportive friends, family members, or coworkers for a referral.
- Take a look at reputable websites (a few are suggested in the Resources section of this book) for a list of trained providers.
- Online Listservs and social networking communities that are focused on PTSD and trauma can provide you with referrals.
- If you have health insurance that covers mental health treatments, ask your carrier for a list of covered mental health care providers in your area. Providers may have areas of expertise listed in their profiles, which can help you narrow down the list.

Once you find a few providers, make contact. Pay attention to how the person makes you feel when you are talking with him or her on the phone. It is important that you feel your provider is empathic, kind, and a good listener. In addition, it helps to know what sort of experience he or she has in treating survivors of trauma. In worksheet 29 is a list of some questions you can use to interview possible therapists, either on the phone or at an initial appointment.

Remember that a good therapist will welcome these types of questions. A client who asks questions is an informed one! There isn't a right or wrong answer to these questions—choosing a therapist comes down to the fit between a client's needs and preferences and a therapist's background and style. For example, some clients prefer a younger therapist who has recently trained at a nationally recognized medical center. Some clients might feel more comfortable with a clinician who has had years of experience treating trauma. You may feel that you do not want someone who prescribes medications, or you may feel that this might be an important step in your healing. The point of the interview guide is to help you talk to potential providers about how they view therapy and how they view change. It is a step toward finding someone who has the right listening skills, level of experience, and background to work well with you.

Worksheet 29: Provider Interview Guide

Purpose: To find a therapist who is right for you.

Instructions: Ask the following questions when you talk to a potential therapist on the telephone or at the first appointment. Add your own questions as well; for example, "Have you worked with combat veterans?" Take notes on each therapist's answers. Photocopy this sheet to use it more than once.

How often do you treat PTSD and trauma?

What approach do you use in therapy?

Do you prescribe medications?

How many years have you been in practice?

What is your degree in? Are you licensed or board certified? Where did you train?

Do you use CBT/DBT/ACT techniques?

Other questions

Other notes

Conclusion

Making the decision to seek mental health treatment is not necessarily easy. The intensity of your symptoms and your level of daily impairment are good guides in helping you decide if you should work with a professional. Not all mental health practitioners have experience treating trauma, and not all have specific experience using CBT, DBT, or ACT techniques. It is important to ask questions of potential providers to find someone who makes you feel comfortable and helps you improve the quality of your life.