

**What Do All Those Letters After a Professional's Name Mean?**  
**Part 1: Where to Begin Looking for Help with Emotional Issues**

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Choosing a mental health professional to help you or a loved one struggling with a crisis is complicated. However, early intervention with a highly qualified professional is still the best predictor of a good outcome. Physicians, psychologists, therapists, and counselors have a range of credentials and licenses. In this series of articles, I will outline those practitioners who are qualified to work independently with patients.

For many people, a trip to their family doctor is where they start. Physicians are the most frequently encountered profession within mental health. Most people are familiar with their Pediatrician, General Practitioner, or Family Physician. What many do not realize is that the Family Physician is the source of most of the prescriptions for mental health medications (some research indicates upwards of 80-90% of such prescriptions are written by these *non-mental health specialists*). There are two physician specialties devoted to treating mental health issues, they are the Psychiatrist and the Neurologist.

**M.D. - Doctor of Medicine**

The M.D. is an advanced degree which typically requires the person to have obtained a bachelors degree (the standard 4-year university degree) in some science such as biology, chemistry, physics, or other basic science area. The M.D. typically takes 4 years in the US to obtain and is followed by on-site training in a hospital setting. This training is referred to as Internship for the first year and Residency for the following years. Residency requirements vary across specialties with 3 or 4 years being common. To be fully licensed as a physician in most states of the US an M.D. must have completed an approved Residency program. So, having been to a Residency, while very important, is not unusual or some particularly special status for a physician.

**D.O. - Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine**

Though less frequently encountered than the M.D., D.O.'s are considered to be physicians under both Federal and State law. Schools of Osteopathy can be free standing and typically take a more "naturalistic" view of healing. Like the M.D., the D.O. has completed a 4-year university-based degree prior to beginning their training to become a physician. D.O.'s, in order to practice as physicians, must also complete the Internship and Residency requirements.

**Psychiatrists**

A Psychiatrist must have a medical degree. Although technically an individual can practice psychiatry having had four years of medical school and a one-year medical internship, most psychiatrists continue their training in a three year residency program in psychiatry. Psychiatrists who have Board certification have had two years of post-residency experience practicing psychiatry and must have passed an examination given by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology.

**Neurologists**

Neurologists specialize in treating brain and nervous system related injuries, diseases, and deformities through surgery.

**APRN**

Advanced Practice Registered Nurses have a master's degree in psychiatric/mental health nursing. These nurses are eligible to be licensed as therapists. APRNs provide a range of primary mental health care services to individuals, families, and groups, and function as psychotherapists, educators, consultants,

advanced case managers, or administrators. Many states require certification by a national body prior to practicing. Once licensed, APRNs are authorized to prescribe medications. (American Nursing Association)

Contact your family physician's office for a referral to a psychiatrist, psychologist or a therapist. The psychiatrist can evaluate your symptoms, suggest medications, prescribe them if you wish, and monitor their helpfulness. Psychiatrists may do therapy or make a referral to a psychologist or therapist in your area. Likewise, If your family physician refers you to a psychologist or therapist, he or she may recommend a psychiatrist for medication management. Whatever path you choose, it is wise to have your medication needs prescribed and monitored by an experienced psychiatrist. Your first appointment is an evaluation and should include a discussion regarding goals, anticipated length of treatment, and a discussion of any values that are important to you. An important component of treatment is the relationship between you and your mental health professional. You must feel confident working through your issues in a trusting relationship.

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