

## **Know the Product: Shopping for Mental Health Care**

When we enter the grocery store or our primary care doctor's office, we generally know what kind of product or service we want and are going to receive. This is often not the case when one seeks mental health services. I cannot count the number of times a new client expressed frustration because they recently saw a psychiatrist and were offered a prescription for medication. What they actually wanted was someone to talk to—not medicine. By the same token, I, a psychologist, have had numerous clients mistakenly assume I would prescribe them medication. By not understanding the distinction between a psychiatrist (MD, attended medical school, provides medication, views things biologically) and a psychologist (PhD, attended graduate school, provides psychotherapy and possibly testing, views things psychologically and sociologically), many people are essentially blind in their quest for mental health care. My secretary daily provides guidance over the phone to callers as to how their mental health insurance works and the difference between a psychiatrist, psychologist, or a therapist/counselor (Master's degree, functions much like a psychologist, does no testing).

There are four different perspectives with respect to the definition and treatment of mental health issues: the Biological, Analytic (Freudian), Behavioral, and Cognitive schools. Each school has its own view regarding how various mental, emotional, and behavioral problems develop, how they are sustained, and how they should be treated.

Mental health professionals tend to follow the school of thought that was prominent in their training. Some providers become more eclectic over time. I believe most mental health practitioners offer the form of therapy that best suits their own personality.

Most laypersons know nothing about these distinct approaches. Moreover, they have no idea what form of therapy a particular a mental health provider tends to use, as it is not customary for clinicians to advertise their theoretical orientation.

For example, suppose someone is interested in receiving mental health services for issues related to anxiety—one of the most common reasons people seek treatment. If that person selects a professional that follows the Biological school, typically a psychiatrist (or nurse practitioner, NP), that patient (as they would be called) most likely would be provided with a prescription for psychotropic medication. If that consumer sees a clinician who adheres to the Analytic perspective, the treatment will likely involve much discussion regarding the patient's (as they are also usually called in this model) childhood.

If the consumer sees a Behavioral therapist, the “client” will be encouraged to go out and gradually experience and face and (hopefully) conquer their fears. Finally, the Cognitive therapist will have the client identify and change their negative, self-defeating thinking.

One approach is not necessarily better than another. Factors such as the specific nature of the issue, how long-standing or severe it is, and the mind-set of the patient/client, etc.

may suggest one perspective over another. I believe consumers of mental health should have some idea what they are going to get before they receive it.

To become a wiser consumer of mental health services, I recommend the following:

- Do a little research on the four schools of thought and try to determine what perspective might appeal to you.
- Look up the practitioner on the net to see if their approach is described. If that is unsuccessful, call the office receptionist or office manager and ask them what theoretical school the clinician follows. If the receptionist or manager cannot answer your question—and don't be surprised when they can't—ask to speak directly to the professional for just a minute to discern their clinical orientation. This is not the time to tell your story; you just want to learn of the provider's approach. You might suggest that the practitioner share their orientation with the staff to avoid such calls in the future.
- Make an appointment with the mental health professional who seems to be a good fit. Finding an appropriate mental health provider is not like calling a plumber—where the closest one is probably good enough. Actually, I think some people expend more effort in locating a plumber than in securing an appropriate clinician.
- If you find that the treatment doesn't seem to be working, let the professional know and discuss alternative methods.
- Be a good client/patient: Keep your appointments; come on time; do your homework; pay your bill; and communicate with your provider.

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