

How to talk to your GP about your mental health

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Foreword

Dr Jonty Heaversedge

For many people, January can be a difficult month, and it is not unusual to feel a little down. This is not helped by the fact that it is one of the coldest, darkest months of the year, when a lack of activity and low levels of sunlight may also have an impact on our state of mind. This makes it even more important that we prioritise our mental wellbeing, and take early action to build our resilience and develop good coping strategies to safeguard our mental health.

This month the Mental Health Foundation is encouraging people to make an extra effort to look after their mental wellbeing, and to feel more confident about asking for help if they need it.

The first step to getting support if you feel you are having difficulties is usually to visit your GP. You may find it helpful just to know there is someone you can talk to about the feelings you are having, and your doctor will be able to offer advice and (where appropriate) medication to help you better understand and manage your feelings. Your GP may also refer you to more specialist services for additional support if he or she feels this will help.

However, talking to a doctor about your own mental health can be difficult - some people worry that they might be making a fuss, others are concerned they will not be listened to or taken seriously. This is why the Foundation has produced a practical guide with details on what to expect from your appointment and what your GP can do for you. By using the tips and advice in the booklet you'll be able to speak to your GP about your mental health with greater confidence.

**Do you
need to see
a GP?**



If you've noticed changes in the way you are **thinking** or **feeling** over the past few weeks or months that concern you and cause you distress, you should consider going to see your GP.

Some of the most frequently experienced symptoms of poor mental wellbeing include:

- Loss of appetite.
- Feeling low or constantly anxious or worrying.
- Thinking negative thoughts about yourself.
- Irritability or moodiness.
- Finding it harder than usual to concentrate.
- Not enjoying life as much as you once did.
- Finding day-to-day life difficult (not feeling up to washing or eating, for example).
- Trouble sleeping, or sleeping too much.
- Seeing or hearing things that other people do not see or hear.

If you have a mental health problem, it's possible that you may not have noticed the signs as symptoms can build gradually over time. 1 in 4 people will experience mental ill health in the course of a year.

Find out about the symptoms of the most common mental health problems:

- [mentalhealth.org.uk/stress](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/stress)
- [mentalhealth.org.uk/anxiety](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/anxiety)
- [mentalhealth.org.uk/depression](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/depression)
- [mentalhealth.org.uk/ocd](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/ocd)
- [mentalhealth.org.uk/bipolar](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/bipolar)

If you recognise the symptoms of any of these and are worried, or if you feel that something isn't right but you can't put your finger on why, we recommend that you speak to your GP. It can be daunting to speak to someone that you may not know well about your mental health, but most people find that speaking to their GP, and the help and support they receive from them, can make all the difference to their lives.

“My GP has been absolutely amazing. He has been relentless in getting me help from every source possible. I would not be here today if it wasn't for him.”

- Jackie



What your GP can help you with

If you speak to your GP about your mental health concerns, they can:

- Ask questions about your feelings and thoughts that may help you better understand what you are going through and what support is available.
- Offer you medication if it's appropriate and/or free talking therapies.
- Recommend simple lifestyle changes that can improve your mental health.
- Invite you back for another appointment in a few weeks' time to see how you're doing. They may refer you to a specialist if they think that would be more helpful.

If you feel very worried about your mental health, and are considering taking your own life, you should talk to someone. You can call your GP surgery and arrange to speak to someone immediately, or alternatively the Samaritans offer completely confidential emotional support 24 hours a day:

- **Call 08457 90 90 90**
(UK, charges apply)
- **Call 1850 60 90 90**
(ROI, charges apply)
- **Or email jo@samaritans.org.uk**

How to prepare for your appointment

Registering and booking the appointment

You must be registered with a local practice to make an appointment. It's easy and quick to register with a practice of your choice in your catchment area (around where you live), and see any of their GPs.

- **For England visit NHS England at <http://www.england.nhs.uk/>.**
- **For Wales visit NHS Direct Wales at www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk or call 0845 4647.**
- **For Scotland visit NHS 24 at www.nhs24.com or call 0800 22 44 88.**
- **For Northern Ireland visit Health and Social Care service finder at servicefinder.hscni.net.**

Finding the best GP for you

You can change GPs whenever you want. You may wish to consider changing GP for the following reasons:

- It may be more convenient to find a practice that offers specialised counselling or mental health services. You can phone the practice to ask what they offer, or find the information for English practices on the NHS Choices website <http://www.nhs.uk/>.
- If you feel that you have a bad relationship with your practice or do not get on with your GP, you may wish to look for other practices in your area which offer a better or friendlier service. England's NHS Choices website lists customer reviews and provides a Patient Survey score for each practice. The 'Quality Practice Award' is only given to the very best practices in England, while all practices must have 'Practice Accreditation'.

- You can ask the receptionist if there is a GP with a specialist interest in mental health and request to see them. It is possible to see a male or female GP. You do not need to tell the receptionist why you are making an appointment. You can just say you'd prefer not to say.
- How long you need to wait to get an appointment to see a GP can vary and depends on how busy the surgery is. If you need to be seen urgently, then you may be able to arrange an emergency appointment through the surgery's reception. If you prefer to see someone particular then you might have to wait until an appointment with that person becomes available.

Preparing for your appointment

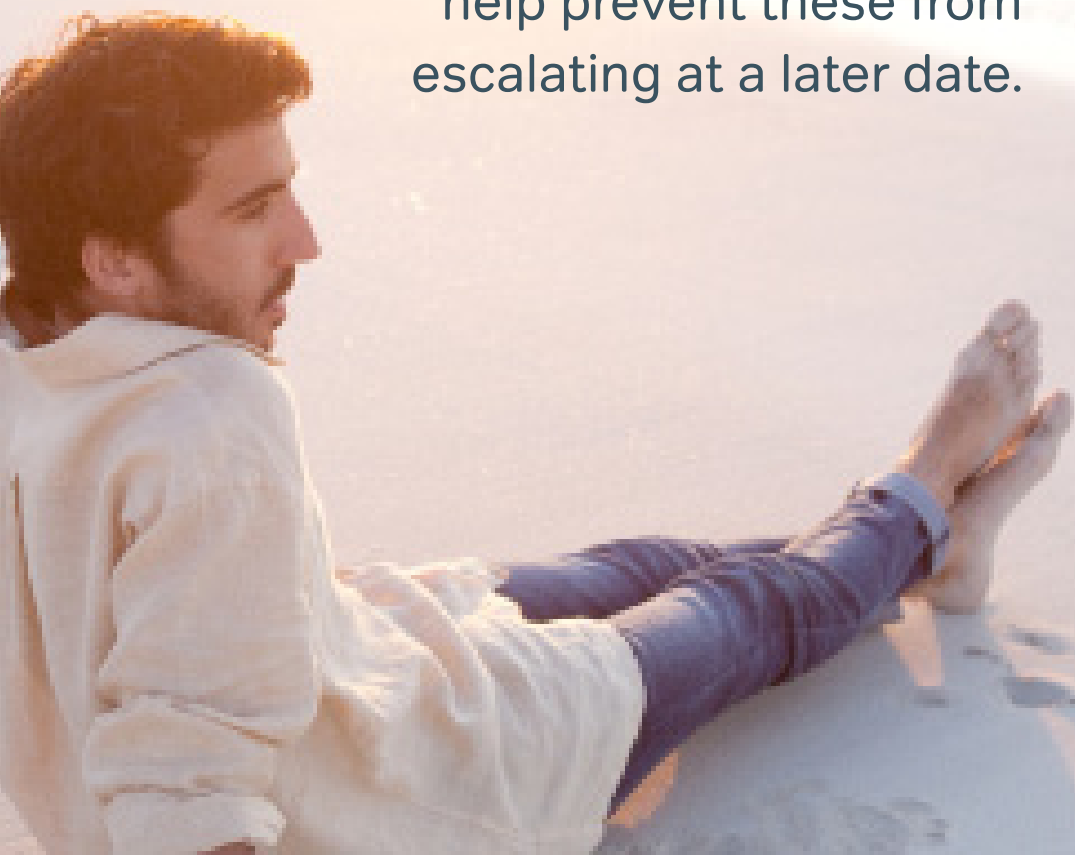
Before the appointment it might be helpful to write down what you'd like to talk about to make sure that you don't forget anything. Take a few minutes before the appointment to write up a list of things you might want to bring up:

- Write down any symptoms of how you're feeling and how your mood might be affecting your day to day life.
- Write down key personal information, including upsetting events in your past and any current major stressful events.
- Make a list of your medical information, including other physical or mental health conditions and the names and amounts of medications, herbal remedies or supplements you take.

- Feel free to take a family member or friend along to your appointment for support it it will help you feel more at ease.
- Write down a list of questions to ask. These may include:
 - * What type of mental health problem might I have?
 - * Why can't I get over mental health problem on my own?
 - * How do you treat my type of mental illness?
 - * Will counselling or psychotherapy help?
 - * Are there medications that might help?
 - * How long will treatment take?
 - * What can I do to help myself?
 - * Do you have any brochures or other printed material that I can have?
 - * What websites do you recommend?

In addition to the questions that you've prepared, don't hesitate to ask questions to your GP if you don't understand something.

Remember that you are not alone,
30% of GP appointments
are related to mental health and
wellbeing issues and **1 in 4**
people will experience some kind
of mental health problem
in the course of a year. Tackling
problems earlier on can
help prevent these from
escalating at a later date.



**During your
appointment**

A typical GP appointment is around ten minutes long, which many GPs and patients feel is not enough time to communicate everything they need. You can book a 'double appointment' if you feel you need more time to discuss what's bothering you.

During your appointment it is important to be as open and honest with the GP as possible. They will ask you questions to gauge a full picture of your health, so be sure to share all the details about how you're feeling or how the symptoms are affecting you. Use the notes you have prepared as a guide if it is helpful.

Opening up about your feelings can be challenging, particularly to someone you don't know. However GPs are trained to deal with sensitive issues in a professional and supportive way, so there is no need to be embarrassed. Everything you tell them is legally confidential, unless they are worried that you may be a danger to yourself or others.

During the consultation, do not be afraid to ask questions and refer to the notes you have prepared beforehand. It is always worth asking why a certain treatment is being offered, whether there are other things that could help and what you think will help you.

The GP may make a diagnosis and can suggest some treatment options to help you, such as prescribing medication, making a referral to a talking therapy service, referring you to a specialist mental health team or providing advice on maintaining your overall wellbeing.

If you are given any medication, your GP should tell you how it is expected to help and inform you about any side effects that may occur. You may wish to ask the GP to repeat what they have told you, or for more information and support with how you are feeling or to write down anything you don't understand. If the GP solely suggests medication, feel free to ask what other treatment options might be available such as talking therapies, exercise or practicing mindfulness.

A note of what was discussed at the appointment will be made and recorded on your medical file. This will be kept confidential, but you may also like to make a note of what was said after the appointment. You may know what next steps you'd like to take after discussing with your GP or you may need some time to think it over. You can let your GP know what you plan to do at a later date.

Next steps

If you like, you can arrange a follow up appointment with your GP to discuss how things have developed or to review your treatment.

- If the GP has prescribed medication this should be followed up by regular check-ups to see if it's helping. If there are any problems with treatment, or if you feel worse, then you should see your GP again to discuss it. You might need to be referred onto a specialist under secondary mental health services to seek further or more experienced help.
- If you have been referred onto mental health services, your GP should still be looking after your general care needs including physical health. They should liaise and work closely alongside mental health services.

- If you were previously under the Care Programme Approach (CPA) and have been discharged, then your GP will continue to provide your care and be responsible for overseeing your health needs.
- If you have a severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, you should be getting an annual physical health check by your GP. People with diagnoses of severe and enduring mental illnesses are at increased risk of a range of physical illnesses and conditions. A health check may include taking your blood pressure, taking your pulse, doing a urine or blood test or checking your weight.



Getting a Second Opinion

If you're unhappy or want to confirm that the advice or support you were given was correct, you can ask for a second opinion from another GP or a specialist. It is your right to see a GP who you feel is competent to deal with your case. You can also make an appointment with another GP in the practice, or change practice altogether if your GP refuses to arrange a second opinion for you.

Sometimes seeing a different doctor can make all the difference.

“When I first became ill and went to the GP with whom I was registered, he was useless and unsympathetic. I was advised by a friend to see a different GP in my practice. WOW what a difference; right from the start he listened, empathised, gave me the time and support I needed when I was scared and confused and referred me to the correct mental health service.”

- Edith

Complaints

If you disagree with the way your GP wants to treat your health problem, or you're unhappy about the service provided by your GP practice, you may wish to make a complaint. You can complain directly to the GP or Practice Manager, or make a written complaint by following the practice's complaints procedure which should be readily accessible on the practice website or at the reception. If there is still an unresolved problem you can complain to the NHS Commissioning Board (England. contactus@nhs.net or 0300 311 22 33).

Under the NHS Constitution you have the right to have your formal written complaint acknowledged within three working days and have it properly investigated. You can also take your complaint to the Independent Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman if you aren't satisfied with the way your complaint has been dealt with by the NHS.

Mental Health Foundation

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Including the



**foundation for
people with
learning disabilities**

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