



05: Getting an Accurate Diagnosis

Introduction

An accurate diagnosis is the first step to effective mental health care. Mental health professionals use the diagnostic process to develop a treatment plan that is most likely to help the care recipient. A diagnosis is often comforting because at least it provides a name for the difficulties the care recipient is experiencing – and a path toward relief.

Diagnosis serves other purposes as well. A diagnosis is necessary before insurance will cover mental health care. It is also required to qualify for disability support through Social Security or for job protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Finally, you, and the person you care for, can use the diagnosis to learn more about the mental health condition and take steps to pave the way for recovery.

Who Can Diagnose?

Several types of professionals are qualified to diagnose mental health conditions. It is best to start with the care recipient's primary care physician. If the care recipient doesn't have a physician, connect with your local community health center. The primary care physician may conduct an initial assessment and administer

treatment if the care recipient's symptoms are mild to moderate or if there are no mental health specialists in your community.

Two groups of specialists are qualified to diagnose mental health conditions:

- 1) Prescribers who mostly focus on medication, and,
- 2) Therapists or counselors who conduct psychotherapy or 'talk therapy.'

Mental Health Prescribers

- **Psychiatrist:** A medical doctor with a degree from an accredited medical school who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions. A psychiatrist will conduct the diagnostic interview, prescribe medication (if needed), and order lab work to make sure the medication is balanced. Psychiatrists don't often conduct psychotherapy, but they may coordinate a treatment team of therapists and other service providers.
- **Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner:** A registered nurse with a graduate degree from an accredited program and specialized training



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in the diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions. The nurse practitioner provides many of the same services as a psychiatrist. A nurse practitioner may refer to a psychiatrist when the patient also has other medical conditions, or when controlled medications (such as narcotics) are part of the treatment regimen.

Mental Health Counselors

- **Psychologist:** A licensed mental health professional with a Ph.D. in clinical, counseling, school, or other specialty areas in psychology from an accredited graduate program. Psychologists conduct psychological evaluations, diagnose mental health conditions, and provide individual and group therapy.
- **Clinical Social Worker:** A clinician with a master's degree in clinical social work from an accredited graduate program. Clinical social workers conduct assessments, diagnose mental health conditions, provide individual and group counseling, case management, and client advocacy.
- **Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC):** A counselor with a master's degree in psychology, counseling, or a related field. Licensed Professional Counselors are trained to diagnose and provide individual and group counseling.

What Does the Diagnostic Process Involve?

A thorough evaluation should begin with a primary care physician who will conduct a physical exam and administer lab tests to rule out other medical conditions with symptoms that can look like mental illness. If the physical examination fails

to explain the symptoms, the doctor may refer to a mental health specialist or seek advice from a mental health expert.

The next step is a psychological assessment (conducted by a licensed mental health counselor) or psychiatric evaluation (conducted by a psychiatrist). The diagnostic process includes:

- **Psychological assessment:** Clinician interview of the care recipient to see how he or she thinks, feels, acts, and relates to others. This assessment should include input from the family.
- **Psychological tests:** Standardized questionnaires and checklists that can help identify and measure symptoms.
- **Family history:** Usually a checklist about illnesses in the family, including mental illnesses in other family members.
- **Personal experiences:** Review of current stresses and history of traumatic experiences.
- **Other medical conditions:** Assessment to reduce the risk of mental health treatment affecting other conditions. In addition, some medical conditions mimic mental illness.

The clinician typically refers to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* when making a diagnosis. The *DSM* is a catalogue of mental disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association. Providers may also refer to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD).

Your care recipient may receive more than one mental health diagnosis. This is because symptoms of mental health conditions overlap. It may not be clear whether one or more diagnoses explain the symptoms the



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care recipient experiences.

Be prepared for the process to take time. Because no lab tests are yet available to definitively diagnose mental health conditions, mental health professionals rely on training, psychological tests, and their clinical experience to determine how symptoms fit into possible diagnoses.

The diagnosis may change. As the clinician works with your care recipient over time, patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior may emerge that indicate a different diagnosis.

The Person I Care For Has a Diagnosis, but It Doesn't Seem Right

Recent research²¹ showed that four in ten caregivers of adults with mental health conditions felt the person they cared for may not have had the correct diagnosis. Among those who thought the diagnosis was correct, it took an average of eight years to get to that point. Fortunately, the science of early intervention in mental illness is advancing²² and the number of effective treatment options is growing.²³

It is important that treatment begin right away. The service provider may start with an initial diagnosis and course of treatment to see how the care recipient responds.

The treatment may include individual therapy, family therapy, support services, or medications. When the treatment plan is developed, ask the provider how long it should take to determine whether the plan is working. If the treatment does not seem to be helping within that period - or helping enough — tell the provider.

The person you care for has the right to a second opinion if the provider does not respond, or if you question the diagnosis and recommended treatment. Be sure to ask the health insurance company whether second opinions are a covered benefit for mental health conditions. You may have to pay out of pocket, but it may be worth the expense.

As a Caregiver, How Can I Help?

If the care recipient agrees, it is helpful for them to complete an 'information release' or 'consent to release information.' This legal document allows you to communicate with the treatment team. The care recipient has the right to decide who should be involved, for how long, and what types of information can be shared. Because clinics or private providers often have their own information release form, the person you care for may have to complete more than one if treatment is provided through multiple agencies or private practitioners. If a consent has been signed, you may be asked to fill out a questionnaire to help identify the diagnosis.

Regardless, you can help by gathering information. If possible, do this in partnership with the person you care for to build trust, reduce confusion, and help him/her advocate for the most effective care.

The following information can be helpful:

- **Health insurance coverage:** Check the care recipient's health plan for in-network providers in your community and for treatments or medications that are covered or excluded.
- **Your observations:** Because you see the care recipient more often than the professional, you are positioned to see

²¹ Hunt, GG; Greene, R; Whiting, G (2016). *On Pins & Needles: Caregivers of Adults with Mental Illness*. National Alliance for Caregiving. Accessed 3/5/2017: <http://www.caregiving.org/mentalhealth>

²² ____ (n.d.) *Early Psychosis and Psychosis* National Alliance on Mental Illness, NAMI. Accessed 3/5/2017: <http://www.nami.org/earlypsychosis>

²³ ____ (n.d.) *National Registry of Evidence Based Programs and Practices (NREPP)*. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Accessed 3/5/2017: <https://www.samhsa.gov/nrepp>



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things that could lead to a more accurate diagnosis, including:

- What the care recipient is doing or saying that raises concerns.
- How long it has been going on.
- Whether some times of day are better than others: is the condition worse at certain times of the day or year, or in specific situations?
- Signs of progress: it is important to note improvement as treatment progresses.
- What helps in addition to treatment: for example, exercise, diet, regular sleep, pets, leisure or social activities or other things that reduce stress.
- **Stressors.** What is going on now that adds to stress? Has the person you care for been traumatized by past experiences?
- **Medical information.** Include other physical, mental health, or substance use conditions.
- **Medications.** Include vitamins, herbal

products, or other supplements, and their dosages.

- **Family history.** Medical and mental health conditions in ancestors and other members of your care recipients extended family.
- **Questions.** Identify questions to ask the mental health provider.

Finally, learn about mental health conditions, effective treatment, communication skills, and how to care for yourself. Family education (such as the NAMI Family to Family course) will help you understand what symptoms to look for, how an illness might develop, and what can be done to help. The time you take to educate yourself will be rewarded in greater understanding, better communication, and increased trust with your care recipient and others in the family. This will relieve some of your caregiving burden and increase the likelihood that your care recipient will recover the ability to lead a full and satisfying life.

Helpful Websites

American Psychological Association (APA)

www.apa.org/helpcenter/assessment.aspx

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) American Psychiatric Association

www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/understanding-mental-disorders

Mayo Clinic

www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/basics/tests-diagnosis/con-20033813

Mental Health America

www.mentalhealthamerica.net/types-mental-health-professionals

National Alliance on Mental Illness, NAMI

- **Understanding Your Diagnosis:** www.nami.org/Find-Support/Living-with-a-Mental-Health-Condition/Understanding-Your-Diagnosis
- **Family to Family:** www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI-Programs/NAMI-Family-to-Family

WebMD

www.webmd.com/mental-health/mental-health-making-diagnosis