Consumer Guidelines for Treatment

When you seek out any services, remember that you are a *consumer*. This means that you have choices and rights, and that if you are not satisfied with the treatment you are receiving you can "shop around" to find treatments that fit better for you.[1] Some guidelines are as follows:

* ***The quality of treatment differs widely.*** There are many health care professionals who can be enormously helpful to you. Unfortunately, there are also professionals who are not helpful, and some who are actually harmful. Research on psychotherapy, for example, shows that therapists differ widely in their effectiveness, and that such differences are *not* associated with number of years' experience, type of training (e.g., social worker vs. psychiatrist vs. psychologist), recovery status (whether the person has overcome an addiction problem), or how much is charged. This means that when selecting a therapist, you will need to evaluate the person based on factors other than these.

* ***Find specialists.*** Because you are struggling with two particular disorders—PTSD and substance abuse—you should seek out the best available help you can from people who are up to date on specialized treatments for these types of problems (and similarly for any other problem for which you need help).

* ***Shop around.*** Before deciding on a treatment, especially in mental health, try to "shop around" by visiting several treaters. For example, you may want to have at least one session with three different therapists to find out who feels most helpful. Keep trying additional ones until you find one you truly like. Treaters differ in their styles, and, just as in other relationships, there are some combinations of people who work better with each other. Try to notice whom you feel most "heard" by, and what style you like (e.g., highly supportive? very direct? confrontational? warm? intelligent? informative?). Notice whether you feel you can truly open up to this person.

* ***Ask questions.*** When you are talking with a potential treater, you have a right to ask questions such as "What is your model of treatment (and are there any other types of treatment for my problems)?", "How would you help me?", "How long would treatment last?", "Have you worked with patients like me before?", "Where did you complete your training?", "Do you accept my health insurance?", "How much will treatment cost?", "Are there any less expensive treatments available?"

* ***Stay only in treatments that work for you.*** If you try a treatment and don't like it, remember that you can leave. Never stay in a treatment out of guilt that you'll hurt the treater's feelings or because you feel pressured. See "How to Evaluate Your Psychotherapy," below.

* ***Report unethical treaters.*** If a treater is unethical (e.g., propositions you sexually), you can report the treater by contacting the head of the clinic or hospital, calling a state board that licenses the treater (e.g., the state medical board), contacting the office of consumer affairs in your state, or contacting the ethics board of the treater's professional association (e.g., the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, or the American Psychiatric Association).

* ***Locate consumer information.*** Some states are beginning to provide phone information designed for consumers of health care. For example, in Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Medical Society (800-377-0550) provides a listing of all physicians in the state (including psychiatrists), their credentials, and any disciplinary actions against them for ethical violations. Also, the Internet has a multitude of information, which you can access at many public libraries.

[1]If you are *mandated* by a court to attend treatment, many of these guidelines may not apply until you have completed the mandated treatment. However, even if mandated, you may have choices of which treatment to attend.

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* ***Know your insurance benefits.***

a. *Find out about your insurance coverage.* Insurance plans differ widely. Contact your insurance company before selecting a treater; give the company your identification number (even within insurance plans, the amount covered may vary); and find out everything you can about the amount that can be covered, for how long, whether you need "preauthorization" to have services covered, whether there is a list of treaters for that particular insurance plan that you can obtain (using such a list may reduce the cost you have to pay), whether the amount paid will differ depending on the treater, and whether coverage will at any point be determined by a clinical review of your case (e.g., some patients with depression cannot get psychotherapy covered for more than a few sessions unless they take antidepressant medication as well). Keep a list of the people you talked to and on what dates.

b. *Confidentiality of your records may be a concern.* You will need to sign a waiver that allows the insurance company to have access to confidential information about you and your treatment. If there is information that you do not want anyone ever to have access to (e.g., that you are on antidepressant medication), you may choose to pay directly rather than having this covered by your insurance.

c. *Know that it is up to you—not your treater—to protect your financial interests.* Indeed, many treaters will not even ask you about your insurance coverage. As with buying any other service or product, it may be wise to do some comparison shopping. You can pay very different amounts for the same treatment. When contacting treaters, it is fine to ask how much they charge *before* booking an appointment.

Also, many people do not know that under Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Medicare, or Medicaid, a treater who is listed as a provider for any of these and who agrees to treat you is legally obligated to accept that insurance first before any private practice billing. Some treaters do not accept patients with these types of insurance, and it is entirely legal to do so. But if a treater is listed as a provider and accepts you as a patient, then the treater must accept that insurance. This means that there are limits on the amount that can be "balance-billed" (i.e., each of these plans sets maximum rates that are allowed, and the provider is obligated to accept these until the insurance runs out for that calendar year). Note, however, that the treater is not obligated to ask you if you have insurance, so unless you ask, you may end up paying for services that would be covered. In short, know your insurance and be clear at the beginning of treatment about how billing will occur.

HOW TO EVALUATE YOUR PSYCHOTHERAPY

Psychotherapy can be enormously helpful to many people, but it can be one of the most difficult treatments to evaluate. It consists of treatment techniques that vary greatly, and its effectiveness depends on the personalities of both you and the therapist, as well as on the relationship you develop together. Although psychotherapy is based in science, it is also an art. Unlike other areas of medical care, it is not typically a "procedure" that gets uniformly applied the same way for each person.

◆ ***Remember that good psychotherapy is available,*** and as with most good things in life, you "know it when you see it." Many people with PTSD and substance abuse have been able to find treatment that feels beneficial to them after some making the effort to shop around. If you have had a bad treatment experience, try not to give up on treatment or blame yourself. Respect and validate your feelings, and search until you find someone you feel better about.

◆ ***Evaluate your treatment after the third session.*** Research indicates that how helpful a psychotherapy feels by the third session stays largely consistent throughout treatment even years later. If you have had three sessions with a therapist and the treatment feels unhelpful, you may be better off finding someone new than sticking with it.

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◆ ***Expect some ups and downs as long as the treatment feels helpful overall.*** Be aware that there are likely to be times when you feel angry or disappointed by the therapist. This is a normal part of psychotherapy. But if it feels like an ongoing problem or frequently feels too intense, you may need to evaluate it more. If you have generally felt helped by the treater, it is usually advisable to stay in the treatment and try to work it through (which may provide you with a real opportunity for important growth). If you have generally *not* felt helped by the treater, then it may be advisable to leave.

◆ ***Remember that your life decisions are your own, as long as you choose safely.*** If a therapist gives you advice to stay or leave a particular job or relationship, to confront your abuser, to go to AA, or any other major advice, view it as *input* that you can accept or reject (as long as you are safe).

◆ ***One of the most common complaints about psychotherapy is that the therapist is kind and supportive, but does not promote growth*** (e.g., give direct feedback, help identify important issues to work on, help you develop new skills). A good psychotherapy is both supportive and growth-producing. If you feel you are just talking a lot but not moving on in visible ways in your life, or that the therapist is "nice" but not really helpful, you may want to find someone who has more to offer you.

◆ ***Stay in treatment as long as it feels helpful. How long does psychotherapy last?*** Most psychotherapies end because the patient decides to leave rather than because the therapist suggests it. As long as you are safe and functional (e.g., not suicidal, not actively abusing substances, able to take care of your responsibilities), the general guideline is to stay in treatment as long as it feels beneficial to you and you want to attend. Talking with the therapist about your wish to leave, getting feedback, and going through a termination process can all be helpful. But as long as you are safe, it is up to you when to be in treatment and when to leave. If you decide to end a treatment, do not feel guilty, ashamed, or bad about it. If you are not currently safe, as described above, you may need to stay in treatment until you feel more stable or at least until you find a new treatment.

◆ ***If a treatment feels as if it is not working . . .***

- *Try telling the treater*, stating the problem directly but respectfully.
- *If you have specific requests, state them*. For example, you might say, "I would like to request that you stop asking me to go on medication; I do not want it at this time."
- *You can request consultation with a senior person in the field.* Many people do not know that this is an option. A consultant is hired by you to meet with you and the therapist (usually in separate meetings) and then to make recommendations. This is typically used in long-term therapy if the therapy reaches an impasse that you and the therapist cannot overcome, or if the therapist insists on treatment recommendations with which you do not agree.
- *Be aware that it is legal and acceptable to tape your psychotherapy sessions* (using your own tape recorder and tapes) as long as you let the therapist know. Some people do this as a way to get more out of the sessions, listening to them later. It may also be useful if you want someone else to hear the sessions (e.g., if you hire a consultant to evaluate the treatment).
- *Know that many clinics will allow you to switch therapists if you ask*. If you feel that you cannot work with the person to whom you've been assigned and you have given it a reasonable chance, find out whether you can switch (e.g., ask the therapist and clinic director).

◆ ***Be wary of treaters who . . .***

- *Convey that impasses in treatment are all your fault* (e.g., they're all due to your "resistance," "lack of motivation," or "defensiveness"). While there are issues that may be due to you, if a treatment feels stuck for a long time (e.g., more than a month), it is generally due to *both* the therapist and the patient. A high-quality therapist is able to help you move beyond an impasse and does not just blame it on you.
- *Give you the sense that their needs are being met rather than yours*, such as repeatedly directing you to topics that you feel are not important to you

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- *Convey harsh negativity.* This refers to therapists who get mad at you repeatedly, get into intense power struggles, or make you feel "put down" as a person. However, it does not refer to constructive feedback that feels painful to hear but is supportive.
- *Insist that you stay in a treatment that feels as if it's not working for you,* particularly if you've already tried to work it out with that treater.

◆ ***If a therapist has inappropriate boundaries, you can just leave.*** If a therapist attempts to initiate sexual activity with you, invites you to social events or to sessions in places that are not an office, makes inappropriate comments about your attractiveness, or engages in any other serious unprofessional behavior, the best advice is never to return. You do not need to explain your decision or talk to that treater again.

RESOURCES TO EVALUATE HEALTH CARE TREATMENTS

✓ ***Books.*** There are numerous books that can give you more information about how to evaluate your treatment. See a local bookstore or library.

✓ ***The Internet.*** You can search under terms such as "PTSD," "substance abuse," "psychotherapy," outcomes," and "treatment." There is a wealth of information on state-of-the-art knowledge and treatments.

Note: A growing trend is advertising "patient satisfaction" data. Much of the research on patient satisfaction does not undergo rigorous scientific evaluation and may be more promotional than informative.

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