

## **“Hey Doc, I broke my arm and don’t know what to do about it!”**

Ask yourself the following questions: “If I fell out of a tree and broke my arm would I try to fix it myself? Wow, my arm really hurts. Should I just take some aspirin and hope that the bone heals on it’s own? Would it be a good idea to have my friend Merle fix my arm – he is a good carpenter you know?” My answer to these is “No, go see a professional doctor who is trained to help your arm heal correctly!”

In my experience many people unnecessarily suffer with untreated emotional pain. So, I pose another question: Should you see a therapist? One way to know is if you are experiencing problems in your life that you can’t seem to resolve no matter what you try. These could be problems like recurring depression, anxiety, feelings of panic, alcohol or drug addiction, coping with loss such as divorce, loss of a job or death of a loved one or marriage/relationship conflict. To fix your problem you may have gone to your family doctor, taken medication, surfed the net, watched Oprah, spoken with a friend, read self-help books or prayed, yet the problem still painfully persists AND gets in the way of your ability to function. If this sounds like your situation, you could probably benefit from seeing a professional therapist.

Once you’ve determined that you need help, finding a skilled therapist can be a difficult and frustrating ordeal. It’s no wonder, since there is a confusing array of terminology out there describing the field. Psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, counselors of various sorts; it’s hard to know what the differences are between these service providers, and which is right for you, your children, family, friend, etc. So let’s see if we can clear up the matter a bit.

First, know that there is a difference in the educational levels of therapists. A good therapist starts with a master’s or a doctorate in a mental health field (MA, MS, MDiv, MSW, PhD, PsyD, EdD, DMin, MD). Wisdom, empathy and character are necessary, but they aren’t enough; knowledge is essential.

At the Masters level, therapists typically have two additional years of training beyond the Bachelors level. Masters level therapists are most commonly either Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW), Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists (LMFT) or Licensed Professional Counselors (LPC). All three of these professionals can perform therapy services independent of supervision.

Psychologists and psychiatrists both have Doctorate degrees. There is a little more variation in the number of years it takes post-high school to earn a Doctorate, but usually it’s at least eight to ten years, and sometimes more, depending on the specialization. Psychiatrists attend medical school and are Doctors of Medicine (M.D.), while psychologists are either Doctors of Philosophy (Ph.D.) or Doctors of Psychology (Psy.D.). Either type of psychologist can provide therapy, though Ph.D. training emphasizes academic and research training, while the Psy.D. specializes in providing therapy and psychological evaluation to the public.

While Psychologists typically receive advanced training in neurology (brain science) and psychopharmacology (the interaction of psychoactive drugs in the brain), only psychiatrists are authorized to write drug prescriptions.

Psychiatrists are specialists in how medications work in the brain, and often work closely with therapists, handling the medication part of treatment, while psychologists or masters-level therapists handle the talking portion of the treatment.

Next, a good therapist has completed an intense psychotherapy training program ("Clinical Internship"). It may have been part of his/her academic degree, or it may have been a separate postgraduate program. This is important to know about, because some PhD's and MD's have academic knowledge about psychological research or medication, but have never had actual training or practice in psychotherapy. Learning psychotherapy requires real-world practice under the supervision of a skilled mentor. You can't simply learn psychotherapy out of a book or in a classroom. You need the books and the classrooms, but they aren't enough.

Finally, after Internship, and supervised experience, the therapist must pass an examination (sometimes written and oral) given by an authority to which they will be accountable. It could be a government licensing board, or some other credentialing organization.

All therapists are not equal, and just any therapist might not be right for you personally. The very best way to evaluate a therapist is within you. The truth is, it really comes down to who you feel most comfortable with. Just like lawyers, accountants, or plumbers, therapists come in all personality types, levels of training, degrees of integrity, and styles of relating to others. In fact, research shows that the quality of the relationship between a therapist and his/her client is the most critical factor toward a positive outcome to therapy. If you are looking for a therapist, the most important factors are that you like the therapist, feel safe with them and the "fit" seems right.

Today's article posed several questions I am often asked by people. In future columns I intend to answer your questions. If you have a question send it to:

Philip Taft is a licensed psychologist. He has a clinical practice serving children, adolescents and adults in Corsicana.