

Thursday, December 2, 2010

Where to go for Mental Health

By Sara Coffey, D.O.



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Trying to find the right doctor for you? With so many specialties and titles it can be confusing to navigate the complex array of mental health professionals. So, where do patients with mental illness start?

Understanding a doctors training and background may be the first place. Patients with mental illness may be seen by their primary care doctors, counselors, psychiatrists, or psychologists. But, what makes these professionals different? All physicians, either M.D.'s or D.O.'s (Osteopathic Doctors), have similar training. Most often, they have completed four years of undergraduate school, with an emphasis on science courses including biology and chemistry. Then they must pass an entrance exam to start a four-year medical school program where they will receive two more years of core science training as well as other courses to help them understand the human body, disease, and prevention. The last two years of medical school focus on clinical rotations through surgery, OB/GYN, psychiatry, internal medicine, family medicine, and include several months of extra training in a specialty area.



Upon completion of medical school, you are officially referred to as “doctor,” but a psychiatrist’s training does not end there. A residency program comes next with hands-on training under the guidance of a more seasoned physician. Take my background for example. As a psychiatry resident, my first year of residency training included two months working on an inpatient pediatric floor, two months on an inpatient general medical hospital floor, and two months on a neurology service. These rotations are important in psychiatry training because psychiatric patients often have other medical issues in addition to mental health problems. A physician should know the difference between anxiety and a heart attack.

It takes eight years or more of school and four to six years additional years of training to become a fully practicing psychiatrist. I’m on that path, and now I will be able to focus on my psychiatry specialty. That will give me the opportunity to learn the science and art of treating patients from experienced psychiatrists. My integrative medical training will also provide a solid foundation to work with a variety of patients and their mental illnesses.

Posted by Healthy Minds. Healthy Lives. 

### **3 comments:**

Anonymous said...

I find this article by Dr. Coffey to be very informative and helpful. Most people are unsure as to what direction they need to go in order to get help with their mental health issues. This article covered important information as to the background and experience of the professionals. It gives me a better understanding of what questions to ask. Thankyou

[December 2, 2010 3:27 PM](#)

MMC said...

I've never met a psychiatrist with a DO--is this what you're talking about with integrative training? Do you use different approaches than an MD?

[December 2, 2010 7:10 PM](#)

Sara Coffey D.O. said...

MMC thanks for your question.

As a D.O. in addition to learning everything an M.D. does, I also receive training in Osteopathic Medicine, which includes further study of the body and Osteopathic Manipulative Medicine or OMT. OMT includes several techniques for treating the body: working with muscles, bones and soft tissue to provide comfort as well as restore structure and function to the body. Additionally, my Osteopathic medical school training emphasized treating the "whole person" and I feel this holistic approach has served me very well in treating and caring for my own patients. I am aware that a person with anxiety and/or depression can have increased pain and muscle tension and that this affects a patient's overall quality of life. In addition, an understanding of how mental illness can affect a patient's relationships and work performance and other activities is also important to keep in mind, as often times strain in these areas can worsen depression and/or anxiety. Although I don't use OMT as often with my psychiatric patients, I am certainly aware of the importance of treating the whole patient, and if I felt they could benefit from OMT I would certainly refer them to an Osteopathic doctor that specialized in this form of treatment.