

If You're Referred to a Psychiatrist

If you have clinical depression or your PTSD symptoms are severe, your therapist may refer you to a psychiatrist who can prescribe medication. If, and when, you are referred to a psycho-pharmacological psychiatrist, (s)he will do a complete medical and psychiatric work-up. You should be prepared to list your symptoms, their duration and frequency, and other observations you have about your symptoms. In addition, you have the right to expect the psychiatrist to explain your diagnosis and the prescribed medication in detail, in a language you easily understand. You might want to ask the doctor these questions:

- What is my psychiatric diagnosis?
- What are the various types of medications that have been found useful for this diagnosis?
- What are the potential benefits and the possible negative side-effects of each of these medications?
- Are there any initial side-effects that should disappear in time such as nervousness or extreme fatigue? If so, how long should I wait for the initial symptoms to disappear before I call the office?
- Why is this medication being selected over another?
- How much research has been done on this medication and what is the probability that this medication will be helpful?
- How long does it typically take for this medication to have an effect?
- If I were to overdose on this medication, would I die?
- Should I give myself the daily medication or should somebody else have the responsibility of giving it to me?
- What if I forget to take the medication at the prescribed time? Should I take it later in the day or wait until the next day? If I skip a day, should I double the dosage the next day or not?
- What should I do if I vomit the medication for some reason?
- Will this medication interact with other drugs such as alcohol? If so, will the effect be harmful or deadly?
- Will this medication be administered in ever-increasing doses?
- How will you (the psychiatrist) determine if the dosage needs to be changed? Will blood tests be required? If so, how often?
- Do you (the psychiatrist) have any literature on this medication that I can read?
- Is this medication addictive?
- What will happen to me if I suddenly stop taking the medication on my own? What if I don't tell anyone that I stopped taking the medication? What are the signs that others can see that will tell them that I've stopped taking the medication? What should others do to help me if I stop taking the medication?
- At what point can the medication be discontinued? Is there a point after which the body becomes immune to the effects of the medication so that it ceases to be effective?
- How long does it take for the effects of the medication to leave the body? How long after the medication is discontinued should and dietary or alcohol restraints be observed?
- If the medication doesn't work, what other types of medication might be available? Is this medication part of a clinical trial?

If you are sluggish or extremely tired all the time, are unable to concentrate, or if you have physical symptoms such as bleeding, muscle tremors, seizures, dizziness, hyperventilation, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, dark or discolored urine or stools, rashes, inability to urinate, constipation, loss of menstruation, severe headaches, vomiting or nausea, loss of sex drive, or other difficulties, you should call your psychiatrist immediately. Similarly, if you feel suicidal, homicidal, or are self-mutilating, hallucinating, having delusions, experiencing periods of hyperactivity or depressive states, also call your psychiatrist. If your call is not returned promptly, call again. Do not let these side effects go unattended.

Be wary of any psychiatrist who is unfamiliar with medication, who seems to discount your concerns, or who doesn't return your calls regarding questions about prescribed medications or problems with it. If contacting the psychiatrist is always a problem, consider changing psychiatrist. However, you may want to discuss your decision with your therapist, support group members, or your personal care physician.