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Who Can I Turn To?

By Susan E. Murray

Often when things aren’t working for us, we keep doing the same thing but just try harder. When it comes to relationships that aren’t working, or when we are struggling with personal issues, often we are not sure what to do differently or where to go for help. Sometimes we talk to others about our angst — not fully realizing the people we often turn to are not part of the problem, they are not part of the solution, and generally they cannot be objective.

There are many types of mental health professionals to which we can turn about a concern relating to our emotional lives, if we suspect we have mental health issues, and/or relational issues. Perhaps these descriptions will assist you in asking for the help you need and deserve.

A psychiatrist is a physician with training to deal with the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of mental and emotional disorders and may prescribe medication. Some psychiatrists will have completed further study in one of the psychotherapeutic disciplines alongside their medical training, but most will refer patients to other mental health specialists.

Psychologist is a generic term and can cover many different specialties. For example, a clinical psychologist has training in working with people who experience mental health problems or psychological distress. They make diagnoses and provide individual and group therapy, but they do not prescribe medication. A school psychologist is trained specifically to work within the school system to benefit students.

A pastoral counselor is a clergy member with training in clinical pastoral education. They use both psychological and theological resources when counseling individuals and couples.

A licensed professional counselor (LPC) has at least a master’s degree and has completed training to work with individuals, families, and groups in treating mental, behavioral, and emotional problems and disorders.

A marriage and family therapist (LMFT) has at least a master’s degree and works with individuals, as well as families and couples in intimate relationships to nurture change and development. They emphasize family relationships as an important factor in psychological health.

A social worker (LCSW, ACSW) applies social work theory, knowledge and methods to restore or enhance the functioning of individuals, couples, families and groups as well as organizations and communities. MSW signifies they have a master’s degree.

There are a number of other professionals including your primary care physician, physician’s assistants and nurse practitioners are often qualified to provide medication but will refer to the above mental health professionals for counseling.

When a mental health professional has the designation of ‘licensed’ it signifies they have met designated supervision hours and have passed a rigorous examination in order to practice their profession. They can provide understanding, offer strategies, and introduce you to new relational skills, many of them within a Christian context. They all operate by a set of ethical standards, including confidentiality. Your costs for their services will depend on the state you live in, your insurance coverage, their credentials, as well as other factors.

Susan E. Murray is professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, certified family life educator, and licensed marriage and family therapist.