AMBULANCE

Seeking help for a mental health problem

Blue Light Programme

mind
for better mental health
Seeking help for a mental health problem

This is a guide for ambulance service staff and volunteers on how to seek professional help for a mental health problem.

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How do I take the first steps?

Seeking help for a mental health problem can be a really important step towards getting and staying well, but it can be hard to know how to start or where to turn to.

Our research shows:

- Ambulance service staff and volunteers are more likely to experience a mental health problem than the general workforce.

- Repeated exposure to traumatic events, workload pressures and long working hours are all triggers of poor mental health for people in the ambulance service.

- You work hard to prevent your mental health problems from affecting your performance at work, but this comes at a large personal cost, impacting your relationships and physical health.
When is it ok to seek help?

You might feel uncomfortable seeking support for your mental health, and feel like you should be able to stay strong. Or you might have been feeling this way for so long that you think you can’t be helped. But *it’s always ok for you to seek help* – even if you’re not sure if you are experiencing a specific mental health problem.

You might choose to seek help because:
- you’re finding it difficult to cope with your thoughts and feelings
- your thoughts and feelings are having an impact on your day-to-day life
- you want to find out about available support.

*I always felt like I had to stay strong, that I couldn’t be weak; but that was the worst thing I could do, really, because everyone’s got their limit, and I had reached mine.*

Who can I talk to?

The best way to start is normally by talking to a health care professional, such as your GP.

Your GP can:
- make a diagnosis
- offer you support and treatments
- refer you to a specialist service.
What should I say to my GP?

It can be hard to know how to talk to your doctor about your mental health – especially when you’re not feeling well. But it’s important to remember that there is no wrong way to tell someone how you’re feeling.

Here are some things to consider:

- Be honest and open.
- Focus on how you feel, rather than what diagnosis you might meet.
- Try to explain how you’ve been feeling over the past few months or weeks, and anything that has changed.
- Use words and descriptions that feel natural to you – you don’t have to say specific things to get help.
- Try not to worry that your problem is too small or unimportant – everyone deserves help and your doctor is there to support you.

*Being as open and honest as possible, even though extremely difficult, is what has assisted me.*

How can I prepare?

GP appointments are usually very short, and sometimes you might forget to say things that are important. Being prepared can help you get the most out of your appointment.

Here are some suggestions:

- **Write down what you want to say in advance**, and take your notes in with you.
- **Give yourself enough time to get to your appointment**, so that you don’t feel rushed or stressed.
- **Think about taking someone with you** to support you, like a close friend or family member.
- **Highlight or print out any information** you’ve found that helps you explain how you’re feeling.
- If you have a few things to talk about, you can **ask for a longer appointment** (you’ll need to do this when you’re booking it in).
What might happen when I talk to my doctor?

In your appointment, your doctor will probably make an *initial assessment* by asking questions about:

- your mood, thoughts and behaviours – sometimes by using questionnaires or forms which measure depression and anxiety
- any sleep problems or changes in appetite
- your medical history, and your family’s medical history.

They might also *check your physical health* to rule out any physical illness. This could involve:

- taking your blood pressure
- measuring your weight
- doing a blood test.

The outcome of your appointment will usually depend on:

- what you say
- what your doctor thinks might help
- what kind of support you would like.
What might the outcome of my appointment be?

Your appointment might have several possible outcomes:

- **Monitoring** – your doctor might ask you to come back for another appointment before offering any treatment.

- **Diagnosis** – your doctor might give you a diagnosis, for example of depression or anxiety. This doesn’t always happen after your first appointment and may only be possible after monitoring you over time or referring you to a specialist.

- **Referral** – your doctor could refer you to another service, such as a psychiatrist or community mental health team (CMHT), or for talking treatments (sometimes called ‘psychological wellbeing services’).

- **Self-referral** – your doctor could give you details of a service you can contact yourself, for example psychological wellbeing services or a CMHT.

- **Self-help resources** – your doctor might recommend resources for you to use by yourself. These are tools that have been developed by health care professionals, and can include workbooks, computer programmes or exercise programmes (sometimes called ‘exercise on prescription’).

- **Medication** – your doctor might offer to prescribe you psychiatric medication.

In most cases, everything you tell your doctor will be confidential. The only exceptions are if you tell them something which makes them believe that you might seriously harm yourself or someone else. In this situation, they will decide how to balance your right to confidentiality with the need to keep you and others safe.
What decisions can I make?

Making decisions about your treatment should be a conversation, involving both you and your health care professionals. You should expect to have a say in how, where and when you receive treatment, and who treats you.

Who treats you

Having a good relationship with your GP can be a really important way of getting the right support. Getting the right help doesn’t always happen straight away, and there may be times when you’re not happy with the support you’re getting.

If you don’t feel you have a good relationship with your current GP, you can:

- **Ask to see a different doctor.** You can do this by asking the receptionist to make you an appointment with a different GP, moving to a different GP surgery, or consider seeking help through the private sector (see p.20).

- **Ask to talk to a different type of practitioner,** like a nurse, specialist mental health worker or practice counsellor.
Ask your doctor to refer you to a specialist.

Self-refer to another service (in some cases). If you self-refer to a psychological wellbeing service or a community mental health team (CMHT), they will normally carry out another initial assessment to see if they can support you.

What treatment you receive

There are lots of different treatments that can help you manage your mental health. The most common are talking treatments and psychiatric medication. How effective any treatment is differs from person to person, and you might have to try different things before you find out what works for you.

I was involved in choices about my medication. We agreed on a particular antipsychotic because of my issues around weight... and the change happened because of me! That made me feel in charge of my own care.

Where you receive treatment

You can be involved in making sure your treatment is accessible to you.

This could include:

- asking for home visits
- choosing a service close to where you live
- deciding not to accept treatment in a service which is too far away.

There may be some limits, such as if a service only exists in certain areas. But your health care team should try to offer you a choice whenever they can, and work with you to find a suitable location for your treatment.

When you receive treatment

Talking treatments

Whatever your treatment is, you should receive it within a reasonable amount of time. However, there can sometimes be long waiting times to access talking treatments through the NHS.

- You can ask your doctor for an estimate of how long the waiting lists are.
If you are worried that waiting for treatment is going to have a serious impact on your wellbeing, you can ask your doctor what extra support they can offer.

If you are finding it very difficult to access the service you want on the NHS, you could think about exploring options through the private sector (see p.20).

Medication

- You can discuss with your doctor when you will start medication and how long you will take it for.
- Your doctor should offer you regular appointments to review your medication, but you can ask for a medication review at any time.
- If you need to see a specialist before taking medication, you can ask your doctor for other support while you are waiting.
How can I seek help through the private sector?

Although it’s not an option for many people because of the financial cost, you might feel it’s the right choice for you to see a private nurse, doctor, psychiatrist or therapist – either alongside NHS support, or instead of it.

Why might I decide to go private?

Some common reasons for considering seeking help through the private sector might be:

- You’re not receiving the support you want from your NHS GP.
- You want a second – or third – opinion, and your NHS GP isn’t able to provide it.
- You want to access support more quickly, for example if there is a long waiting list for talking treatments on the NHS in your area.
- You’re looking for a specialist treatment or more choice of treatments and providers.
- The treatment you want isn’t available through the NHS.

- You want more intensive support, or support over a longer period of time.
- You want access to medication that isn’t provided through the NHS.
- You want to attend a private hospital or clinic.

I tried going through the NHS but counselling wasn’t available out of work hours, which just wasn’t viable for me. I did some research on local therapists in my area, sent a few emails regarding fees and availability, and picked the best fit for me.
How do I access private health care or therapy?

Private GPs, nurses or clinics

You can:
- ask your NHS GP to refer you or make a suggestion
- search online for a private health care provider and contact them directly
- use an online listing service, such as Patient.co.uk’s search facility (see ‘Useful contacts’ on p.37).

All doctors (including GPs and psychiatrists) and all nurses (including community psychiatric nurses (CPNs)) must be properly qualified and registered to be legally allowed to practise. You can check that they are registered by searching:
- for doctors – the General Medical Council’s List of Registered Medical Practitioners (see ‘Useful contacts’ on p.37)
- for nurses – the Nursing and Midwifery Council register (see ‘Useful contacts’ on p.37).

You can also ask them directly to show you their qualifications.

Private counsellors or therapists

You can find a therapist through the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) (see ‘Useful contacts’ on p.36). Any therapist you find through this website will have signed up to the BACP’s ethical framework, which means they must:
- behave in a professional and safe way towards you
- explain their responsibilities regarding confidentiality
- tell you their complaints procedure if you ask for it.
How do I pay for private health care?

Private health care can be expensive, so you may need to think carefully about how – or if – you will be able to afford it.

There are two main payment options:

- **Paying the health care provider directly.** Your health care provider should explain any treatment or appointment costs clearly beforehand. Some providers may have payment plans that allow you to pay in instalments.

- **Taking out private health care insurance.** Insurance can cover part or all of the cost of your treatment, depending on your policy. Not all policies cover psychiatric treatment or pre-existing conditions, so before taking out any policy you should check it carefully and make sure you understand what it covers. The consumer organisation Which? publishes some guidance about choosing private health care insurance on its website (see ‘Useful contacts’ on p.38).

Private therapy costs will usually depend on what the therapist charges, how many sessions you go for and how often you go. Some private therapists offer a sliding scale of payment depending on your circumstances.
What other support options are there?

Although the NHS is the largest provider of health care in the UK, there are other options for getting support to help you cope with a mental health problem.

**Employer support**

Find out if your trust has any specialist support services, for example, Employee Assistance Support helpline, Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) or counselling. Each trust will have different services and facilities so it’s best to find out what is available to you by speaking with your occupational health unit.
Specialist ambulance organisations

There are organisations that specialise in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of ambulance service staff and volunteers. For example, The Ambulance Services Charity offers mental health support services (see ‘Useful contacts’ on p.38).

Contact our Blue Light Infoline to find out about other organisations that can help you (see ‘Useful contacts’ on p.36).

Voluntary, community and charity sector organisations

These include:
- local Minds
- counselling centres
- community or charity organisations.

These kinds of services are normally free or low cost, and can offer a range of support, such as:
- talking treatments
- support groups
- peer support
- advocacy
- arts and alternative therapies
- advice services
- online services like forums, live chat or peer support.

However, they are not likely to provide medical services, like psychiatry or prescribe medication.

How do I find these kinds of services?

- Mind’s Blue Light Infoline can give you details of mental health help and support in your area (see ‘Useful contacts’ on p.35).
- Your occupational health unit might have information about services.
- Your GP or health care provider might also be able to give you details of more local organisations.

You can often self-refer to these services, and you may also be referred by your GP.
How do I get help in a crisis?

A crisis is any situation in which you feel you need urgent help. The table on the next page gives some general information on how you can get help in a crisis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What's happening</th>
<th>Ways you can get help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>you think you may act on suicidal feelings, or you have seriously harmed yourself</td>
<td>◆ you can go to any hospital A&amp;E department and ask for help (if you need to, you can call 999 and ask for an ambulance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you are feeling extremely distressed, or are experiencing suicidal feelings</td>
<td>◆ you can contact the Samaritans on 116 123 (they're there to listen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◆ you can go to Mind's website and click the yellow 'I need urgent help' button at the top of the home page for more options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you need medical help or advice fast, but it's not an emergency</td>
<td>◆ you can call NHS 111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>◆ you can contact your GP and make an appointment for as soon as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you're worried that you might experience a crisis in the future</td>
<td>◆ see our web pages on crisis services for information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dan's story

I’ve been working in the ambulance service for 11 years. I started off in the control room, taking 999 calls and dispatching ambulances. I’ve now been on the road for 6 years.

I like my job because we’re doing something different every day. I also enjoy the social aspects, laughing and joking with colleagues on the station.

It can be hard though. We’re getting busier and busier, and it does put a big strain on everybody. When I first started, there was more time between jobs to reflect on things, talk to your colleagues and prepare yourself and your ambulance for the next job. These days not so much.

My mental health issues started about a year and a half ago. We went to a job that involved child abuse. It was awful. We did everything that we could, but unfortunately we weren’t able to save the child.

Initially after the job, I felt low, but I wasn’t drastically affected by it. It was about 24 hours later that thoughts started running through my mind. I couldn’t shake the image of the child from my head.
At work, I wasn’t acting like myself anymore; I wasn’t socialising as much with colleagues, and generally not interacting with people. At home, I became grumpier, and my patience was a lot shorter.

I’d often find myself just sat there, thinking about whether there was anything else I could have done. I think it was the fact that I’ve got similar aged children myself. That’s why this job hit me so hard.

I ended up going to my GP, and they referred me to the in-house counsellor. I was eventually diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I spent about four months off work, and had counselling throughout that time. Doing that, and having time for reflection, helped me a lot. Talking to my peers has also been a massive help. It helps me realise that what I’m going through is normal, and that many people experience things like this from time to time.

I now feel back to my full self, and I feel like a stronger person for it. It’s still sometimes in the back of my mind, but I know how to handle it now.

In the ambulance service, we like to have this feeling that we’re bulletproof, and sometimes you can feel a bit ashamed to admit that there’s something wrong with you. But we’re humans, not robots, and I want people to know that they shouldn’t be afraid to talk and seek help if they need it.
Useful contacts

**Mind Blue Light Infoline**

0300 303 5999 (Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)
text: 84999
bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk
mind.org.uk/bluelight

The Blue Light Infoline offers confidential, independent and practical support, advice and signposting around mental health and wellbeing. The Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families, to help keep you or those you care about well for work.

**British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)**

01455 883 300
itsgoodtotalk.org.uk

BACP is the membership body for counsellors and therapists. It provides information on different types of therapy and you can search for a therapist by area.

**General Medical Council**

gmc-uk.org

Provides information about standards for doctors, and runs the UK medical register which doctors must be registered on to practise medicine.

**NHS 111**

Call: 111

Advice in England when you need medical help fast but it’s not an emergency.

**Nursing and Midwifery Council**

nmc-uk.org

Professional body which regulates and registers all nurses and midwives.

**Patient.co.uk**

patient.co.uk

Offers information about health care. Has a directory of health professionals, including information about private health care and professional qualifications.
Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK
Chris PO Box 90 90
Stirling FK8 2SA
24-hour helpline (free-to-call): 116 123
jo@samaritans.org
samaritans.org

24-hour emotional support for anyone struggling to cope.

The Ambulance Services Charity (TASC)

0800 103 2999 (support line)
theasc.org.uk

Provides support to current and retired ambulance services personnel, their families and dependents.

Which?

which.co.uk

Provides consumer information on choosing private medical insurance.

This is a shortened version of the original text.
For the full online version, visit mind.org.uk/BlueLightBooklets

Give us your feedback
Email bluelight@mind.org.uk if you have any feedback on this booklet.

References available on request
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We’re Mind, the mental health charity.

We won’t give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets both support and respect.

mind.org.uk/BlueLight

bluelight@mind.org.uk

Mind Blue Light Infoline:
0300 303 5999 (Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm, local rates), or text: 84999

@MindCharity #mybluelight
Mind

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