

FREE GUIDE

Preparing for Your First Psychiatric Evaluation

A step-by-step guide to help you feel confident and prepared. What to bring, what to expect, and how to get the most from your first visit.

8 pages | Printable | Shareable

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Taking this step is an act of courage. This guide will help you feel ready.

You Are Taking an Important Step

If you are reading this, you have already done something many people struggle with: you have decided to seek help. That decision alone is meaningful and worth recognizing.

A psychiatric evaluation is simply a conversation, a thorough one, between you and a doctor whose job is to understand what you have been experiencing and figure out how to help. There are no trick questions. There are no wrong answers. You do not have to have your thoughts perfectly organized.

This guide will walk you through exactly what to expect, what to bring, and how to prepare, so you can walk into your appointment with confidence.

A note for parents:

If you are bringing your child for an evaluation, everything in this guide applies to you as well. The section on page 7 is written specifically for parents preparing children for a psychiatric visit.

What to Bring to Your Appointment

Being prepared makes the evaluation smoother and more productive. Here is what to bring:

Essential Documents

- Your photo ID and insurance card
 - A list of all current medications (prescription and over-the-counter), including doses
 - Any previous psychiatric or psychological evaluation reports
 - School reports or IEP/504 documentation (for children)
 - Medical records related to your mental health history

Helpful Information to Write Down Before Your Visit

- Your main concerns in your own words: "I have been feeling..." or "My child has been..."
 - When symptoms started and how they have changed over time
 - Family history of mental health conditions (depression, anxiety, ADHD, bipolar disorder, substance use)
 - Major life changes or stressful events in the past year
 - What you have already tried (therapy, medication, self-help strategies) and whether it helped
 - Questions you want to ask the doctor

Pro Tip:

Write things down before your visit. It is completely normal to forget details when you are sitting in a new office talking to someone for the first time. A written list ensures nothing important gets missed.

What the Evaluation Looks Like

A thorough psychiatric evaluation typically takes 60 to 90 minutes for the initial visit. It generally has three parts:

Part 1: Your Story

The doctor will ask you to describe what has been going on in your own words. This is not a test. There are no right or wrong answers. The doctor wants to hear your experience: what you are struggling with, when it started, how it affects your daily life, and what brought you in today.

You might hear questions like:

- "What brings you in today?"
 - "How has your sleep been?"
 - "Tell me about your energy level and concentration."
 - "Have you noticed changes in your appetite or weight?"
 - "How are things at work (or school)?"
 - "Do you ever feel anxious, hopeless, or have thoughts of harming yourself?"

Part 2: Background and History

The doctor will ask about your medical history, family history, developmental history (for children), educational history, social history, and any previous mental health treatment. This information helps form a complete picture.

Part 3: Discussion and Next Steps

After gathering information, the doctor will share initial impressions, discuss possible diagnoses, and talk about treatment options. This might include medication, therapy, lifestyle changes, or a combination. You will have a chance to ask questions and discuss what feels right for you.

How to Describe Your Symptoms

Many people worry they will not be able to explain what they are feeling. Here is a simple framework that helps:

The "What, When, How Much" Framework

1. **WHAT** you are experiencing: Name the feeling or behavior as best you can. "I feel sad most of the time." "I cannot concentrate at work." "My child has meltdowns every day after school."
2. **WHEN** it started: "This has been going on for about six months." "It got worse after I started my new job." "We first noticed it in second grade."
3. **HOW MUCH** it affects your life: "I have missed three days of work this month." "She is failing two classes." "I do not want to leave the house anymore."

That is it. You do not need clinical language. You do not need to diagnose yourself. Just tell the doctor what is happening, when it started, and how much it is disrupting your life.

It is OK to say:

"I do not know how to describe it" or "I feel overwhelmed but I cannot pinpoint why." The doctor is trained to ask follow-up questions that help clarify what you are experiencing. You are not expected to have all the answers.

Questions to Ask Your Psychiatrist

A good psychiatric relationship is a partnership. You should feel comfortable asking questions. Here are some you might find helpful:

About Your Diagnosis

- "What do you think is going on?"
 - "How confident are you in this diagnosis?"
 - "Could this be something else?"
 - "Is further testing needed?"

About Treatment

- "What treatment do you recommend, and why?"
 - "What are the benefits and risks of this medication?"
 - "How long before I notice improvement?"
 - "What side effects should I watch for?"
 - "Should I also be in therapy?"

About What Comes Next

- "How often will I need to come back?"
 - "What should I do if symptoms get worse before my next visit?"
 - "Is there anything I can do at home to help?"
 - "Who should I call if I have an emergency?"

Remember:

There is no such thing as a stupid question. If something is unclear, ask. If you do not understand a medical term, say so. A good psychiatrist will always explain things in plain language.

Preparing Your Child for the Visit

Children (and teens) may feel anxious or confused about seeing a psychiatrist. Here is how to set them up for a positive experience:

What to Tell Your Child

- Use age-appropriate, honest language: "We are going to see a doctor who helps with feelings and thinking."
- Reassure them: "You are not in trouble. This is not a punishment."
 - Normalize it: "Lots of kids see this kind of doctor. It means we care about how you are feeling."
 - Explain what will happen: "The doctor will ask you some questions and we will all talk together."
 - Let them know it is safe: "You can say whatever you want. Nothing you say will get you in trouble."

What Not to Say

- Do not use threatening language: "If you do not behave, the doctor will..." This creates fear.
- Do not make promises you cannot keep: "The doctor will fix everything today."
 - Do not minimize their experience: "It is not that bad." Instead, validate: "I can see this is hard for

What Parents Should Prepare

- Bring report cards and teacher comments
 - Note specific behaviors you have observed (with dates if possible)
 - Write down what other professionals have said (pediatrician, school counselor, therapist)
 - Be ready to step out briefly if the doctor wants to talk to your child alone (especially

You Are Ready

Here is the truth: there is no way to be "perfectly prepared" for a psychiatric evaluation. The doctor does not expect perfection. They expect you to show up, be honest about what you are going through, and be open to a conversation about how to move forward.

The hardest part, making the appointment, is already behind you. Everything else is just a conversation.

Quick Checklist Before Your Appointment

- & ID and insurance card packed
- & Medication list written down
- & Main concerns written in your own words
- & Questions for the doctor written down
- & Previous records gathered (if available)
- & Child prepared with honest, reassuring language (if applicable)
- & Deep breath taken — you are doing the right thing

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This guide is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Always consult with a qualified healthcare provider for diagnosis and treatment.