

# MENTAL HEALTH

## FINDING THE RIGHT TREATMENT

**S**tress, overwork and bad eating habits can leave many of us feeling down. Although these minor problems can be addressed with rest and nutrition, other forms of depression and anxiety require the help of mental health professionals. Many people might be reluctant to go for counseling or therapy due to the stigma that some place on treating mental health issues. This month, Dr. Doug Berger offers us some insights into mental health care for the international community in Tokyo.

BY DR. DOUG BERGER, MD, PH.D

There are a range of mental health services available to Westerners in Tokyo. Many non-Japanese English speakers prefer Western psychiatric care or mental health counseling versus the local Japanese therapeutic community because of cultural and language differences, along with the reputation of Western mental health being more advanced than in Japan.

Western therapists in Tokyo range from aroma therapists, “body-energy” healing practitioners, religious leaders and life coaches, to Ph.D. psychologists and an occasional M.D. psychiatrist. While there are degrees and qualifications in Japan for clinical psychologists, M.D. psychiatrists have a medical licensing board in Japan. However, there is no

regulation for counseling and anyone can say they are a psychotherapist. While most of the Western therapists are qualified to practice in their home countries, few have any official Japanese qualifications. An occasional Westerner has a certificate from the Japan Clinical Psychologists Association or a Ph.D. from a Japanese university. A handful of Japanese psychiatrists have also done residency or earned a medical license in the United States. Some will see Westerners for medication and perhaps psychotherapy, but many have not fully bridged the cultural barrier.

Western patients who need psychiatric medicine will either be referred to a licensed Japanese M.D., or present themselves directly to a medical clinic. A few Western GPs and internists in Tokyo have either taken the Japanese medical

license test, or come from a country that has a reciprocal treaty with Japan. Some Westerners will also go directly to a Japanese physician, especially if they are on the Japanese National Health plan.

It is important for people to confirm the credentials of the therapist on their own. While one can see a diploma or license in a frame, the only way to really make sure the credentials are valid is to ask the therapist for information on the certification or licensing board in their home country. It might be prudent to stay away from a therapist that does not readily have – or is not willing to provide – this information.

In Japan, there is also no malpractice insurance system for non-Japanese credentialed therapists, leaving a legal void in terms of malpractice responsibility. This has caused problems in the past concerning Western therapists who lack the exact credentials to treat mental health patients (i.e., one therapist stated he was trained in surgery). One therapist found treating children was on parole for pedophilia (this person eventually left Japan but, for unknown reasons, the Japanese police did not remove this person from Japan when informed).

Some people would rather not accept the perceived “personal weakness” of having a mental disorder and/or do not agree to get medical treatment. These people might gravitate towards “body-energy” therapists and life coaches for the treatment of anxiety and depression. “Body-energy” or “spiritual healing” practitioners might help patients with the “placebo” effect – that’s where the patient trusts the therapist and believes in the therapy, helping them to relax. Symptoms that are a psychological reaction to an underlying biological illness like depression may subside. The main risk of these therapies though is when the practitioner does not recognize a patient with a psychiatric illness and refer them to a specialist, or does not want to because of monetary incentive. Most professional non-medical therapists (e.g., psychologists) do have some idea when a patient needs to see a psychiatrist for medication; but this is not always the case for mild illnesses like dysthymia, cyclothymia, or bipolar disorder type II.

The most prudent course to take if one has mental health issues that do not readily resolve with a healthy lifestyle is to see a mental health professional.



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