

When to Refer for Marital and Family Therapy

A Guide for Professionals

As a professional, you may be the first to recognize marital and family problems that need attention.

Recognizing a problem is the first step in finding a solution. Making a successful referral is even more important. That is when you may choose to refer to a qualified marital and family therapist.

This brochure provides you with a guide for making an appropriate referral to a well-trained marital and family therapist.

Identifying Marital and Family Problems

Although all individuals, couples and families experience some problems, it is not easy to identify which problems require the assistance of a marital and family therapist.

All of us traverse a series of normal and expected developmental stages, each posing challenges and possible pitfalls. For example, as children move from childhood to adolescence, or adults move from productive employment into retirement, the family may need special support to make necessary changes and adjustment.

Many individuals, couples, and families have unique needs and face difficult problems, such as school failure, a rebellious teenager, or alcoholism and/or substance abuse. In addition, most individuals, couples, and families also face unexpected problems and crises, such as death in the family, a divorce, a sudden illness, or unemployment. These and other problems often require professional services such as those provided by qualified marital and family therapists.

Distress Signals

Symptoms of marital and family distress arise as individuals, couples, and families experience normal developmental stages, face special needs and problems, or confront unexpected crises. These symptoms are not always obvious, even to the trained observer. Some signals to look for are:

- Feelings of marital and family dissatisfaction.
- Frequent references to a child's behavior, school adjustment, or underachievement.
- Sexual problems or concerns.
- Complaints of "unexplainable" fatigue.
- Emotional distress when talking about one's fiancée, spouse, children, parents, or other family member.
- References to feelings of loneliness, isolation, moodiness, depression.
- Unexplained physical injuries to spouse or children.
- Repeated requests for tranquilizers, energizers, or sleeping aids.
- Repeated illnesses or non-compliance with treatment regime.
- Excessive abuse of alcohol and/or drugs.
- Repeated financial difficulties.
- Inability to set or attain goals.
- Drastic weight fluctuations and/or irregular eating patterns.
- Repeated employment difficulties, frequent job changes, difficulty with co-workers.

Profile of a Trained and Qualified Marital and Family Therapist

Marital and family therapists are specially trained to help individuals, couples, and families resolve emotional, marital, and family problems.

Marital and family therapists help individuals, couples, and families with pre-marital, marital, parenting, step-parenting, divorce, remarriage, and other lifecycle issues.

When making a referral for marital and family therapy, you should be confident that the professional to whom you are referring has been appropriately trained.

The AAMFT clinical member requirements have been established to help professionals and the public identify such practitioners. AAMFT clinical members have a minimum of a Masters degree including specific graduate training in marital and family therapy, and also have completed at least two years of supervised clinical practice with couples and families. In addition, clinical members of AAMFT meet applicable state licensure requirements.

AAMFT clinical members are trained in the diagnosis and treatment of mental and nervous disorders and also are knowledgeable in such areas as human growth and development, behavioral patterns, marital and family interaction, sexual dysfunction, parent-child relationships, and the dynamics of family systems. They are trained to use a variety of therapeutic techniques and process.

AAMFT clinical members observe a strict ethical code and welcome inquiries about their training, experience, theoretical orientation, length of treatment, goals of therapies and fees.

How and When to Make a Referral

If you believe that an individual, couple, or family could benefit from marital and family therapy, refer to a marital and family therapist you know personally or professionally, or AAMFT will be pleased to provide you with the names of AAMFT clinical members in your community.

- REFER at the first sign of emotional, marital or family distress. Delay can compound the problem.
- PROVIDE your client with the names of several qualified marital and family therapists.
- SUGGEST that your client call and request information regarding the practitioner's training, experience, and fees.
- DISCUSS a marital and family therapist's special areas of expertise with the person(s) you are referring.
- REFER couples and/or families for therapy together.
- ASK the family to use your name as the referring professional when they make their initial call to the marital and family therapist.
- FOLLOW UP with both your client and the marital and family therapist.

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