



When Is It Time To Seek Professional Help?

My husband, Greg, and I married when we were in grad school. I brought two children to the marriage and money was tight. When we bought our first house, he started hitting used bookstores, collecting the Time-Life Home Repair and Improvement Series. Those thin volumes had boring titles — *Heating and Cooling, Plumbing, Repairing Appliances* — but the content proved invaluable, allowing us to become fairly skilled at making home improvements and repairs without calling on professionals.

We did a lot of work — small things such as replacing doors and adding insulation, and larger jobs, too, such as painting the entire exterior of our house (I wouldn't recommend it). Minor electrical work was a bit of a challenge, but with step-by-step instructions, nothing we couldn't handle. Still, nobody wants to burn down the house, so when a minor electrical matter became major, we were smart enough to seek the help of a professional.

However, when it comes to mental health, too many people are reluctant to do the same. And even if they do, they are pretty reluctant to talk about it. But according to NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), one in five adults in the United States experiences mental illness in a given year. That's a lot of people who are — or should be — seeking professional help.

I've never been too shy about letting people know I see a therapist. Maybe that's because the first time I saw one it was at the urging of a very kind, older woman. I'll never forget what she said. It was a long time ago and I was a very different person — the kind of person who was in an unhappy marriage and went to church three times a week hoping it would help.

After services one Sunday morning, I sought out this gentle woman and asked her to pray for me. She asked me what was going on and when I told her, she very wisely said, "Honey, you don't need prayer, you need to see a therapist." It was said with great kindness, and she recommended someone her husband, who had been very depressed, had seen himself.

If I hadn't talked to her, I wouldn't have known it was time to seek professional help. She didn't make it seem like a shameful thing. She made it seem practical and necessary. And it was.

How do you know it's time to seek professional help? A friend suggested that when you think you need help, you probably do. I would add that anyone who is going through a very stressful situation or who has suffered a traumatic loss (of a loved one, a relationship, a job) might very well find a few sessions with a therapist useful. As for me, I check in now and then when things get overwhelming. (When you have a spouse, a full-time job, aging parents, grownup kids, a couple of grandkids, and well, you know, a life, overwhelming can happen just about any time.)

My therapist usually tells me I'm doing okay, that I've got this. And once I've talked it out with her, I realize I really do. But like I've said, it never hurts to seek professional help. Just to be safe. Because nobody wants to burn down the house. ✧

Carmen Siering is Bloom's managing editor. A wife, mother, and grandmother, she has a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition and is a professional writer and editor. Contact her at carmen@magbloom.com.