Choosing a Family Physician: A Handout for Survivors

For many survivors, fear and anxiety associated with a trip to the doctor, whether for a routine check-up or to deal with a health crisis, prevent survivors from receiving adequate and appropriate health care. As a society, we have been conditioned to give physicians a heavy dose of respect (common emotional translation for survivors: power) with little regard for the impact and emotional cost to us. The points which follow might help restore some balance to the doctor/patient relationship and make the process of choosing a doctor a little easier for survivors.

Appearance **does** matter!

Consider the age, gender, and physical appearance of the person(s) who abused you and choose a doctor with different physical attributes. A health crisis is not the time to be swamped by obvious triggers. While you may choose at some time to stretch your coping ability, if you choose a person who looks similar to a past abuser, you take the risk of avoiding adequate health care because you can't get past appearance triggers.

Choose a physician who has a similar belief system and life philosophy to you.

Conflicts and more anxiety are certain if, for example, you are more inclined toward less invasive natural remedies and your doctor is inclined toward highly interventive, cutting-edge medical technology.

Reclaim your power.

While a doctor has more medical knowledge than you have, you are their employer. Their role is to be a consulting partner in your health care. Understanding that you can "fire" them and choose to work with someone else may restore some of the balance of power in the relationship.

Spend adequate time interviewing potential physicians.

A doctor who won't take the time during an initial visit for you to ask all your questions is likely to rush you later. A doctor who allows his/her staff to interrupt or takes phone calls throughout the interview may well do the same in the midst of examining you. A doctor who lays out a treatment plan including highly intrusive exams because they always want a baseline with new patients is showing a lack of sensitivity to your personal boundaries and ability to trust new relationships; this will not likely improve over time. (Obviously, where emergency treatment is required, this is
irrelevant.)

Be forthright about being a survivor.
Some doctors already know they don't have the skills, patience, or sensitivity to help survivors cope with medical procedures. Knowing this upfront can save you from personalizing a failed working relationship as all about you and your issues.

Assess the physical layout of the office.
If the waiting area is reasonably comfortable (and if is not over-crowded with patients stuck waiting for a chronically late-running doctor), you may find you go into the appointment a little less stressed. A quiet corner of the office where you can gather yourself either before or after an appointment if necessary is a bonus.

The doctor is only one part of the health care team.
More and more, doctors are counting on nurse practitioners and physician assistants. Almost certainly, a nurse practitioner or physician assistant will be taking your history and doing an initial assessment before you see your doctor. You need to be comfortable and confident about their ability to care for you as well as that of the doctor.

What happens when your doctor is unavailable?
Group practices are becoming more common among doctors and are usually made up of doctors who share similar care philosophies. You might be spared a trip to a hospital emergency unit or after-hours clinic because the practicing partners often cover for each other for evenings, weekends, and vacations. If your doctor is part of a group practice, take advantage of meeting the others in the practice before you're faced with an emergency, and be prepared to take a firm stand in making the office aware of your preference to see only your doctor when they are available.

Keep in mind, no physician is perfect; doctors are human beings, and just like the rest of us, each one has a few “warts”. You will likely interview a number of physicians before you find one who feels comfortable to you. If, however, you consider these points when you are seeking a new physician, you are likely to be well on your way to finding a doctor who will provide you with the sensitive, compassionate medical care you need with the least amount of fear and anxiety possible.

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