

## Finding an Off-Campus Therapist

When students are referred to the local community for psychotherapy, they often have questions about how to find a therapist, navigating health insurance, and making the first appointment. Below are a few guidelines to help you find the right provider:

### 1. **Start with people you know.**

- Asking friends and family members can be a great starting point. Sometimes they have worked with people in the past that they found very helpful. However, it is important to remember that the right therapist for your friend may not be right for you.
- Get a referral from another professional source -- e.g., your family doctor, professor, clergy member, etc.

### 2. **Call your health insurance company** and ask them the details about your mental health coverage to see what your benefits are.

#### **Some examples of questions you can ask your insurance company include:**

- Does my plan cover mental health outpatient visits?
- Do I have to see someone on the provider list? If yes, where can I get a copy of the provider list in my area?
- How does my coverage differ if I see a participating provider versus a provider "outside the network"?
- For how many sessions can I be seen?
- Do I have a co-pay for sessions? Do I have a deductible that I must satisfy? If yes, how much?
- Do I have to fill out any paperwork or be pre-certified prior to seeing a therapist?

#### **If you will be submitting claims:**

- Do I need to submit claims for payment? If yes, where do I send my claims?
- What information will you need from my therapist in order for my claims to be paid? (e.g. diagnosis code)
- Approximately how long does it take to receive a reimbursement?

### 3. **Ask for a list of psychologists/therapists** in your area that are covered by your insurance. You can ask for preferences such as "female therapists only", "anger management", or "addiction specialist". You may consider looking various providers up online (e.g. via Google, yelp, etc). Many psychologists and therapists today have websites or bios online where you can read a bit about their specialty areas, education/training, years in practice, location, etc. Another helpful website to find and read about various provider's practices is : <http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/>

### 4. **Call the various referrals you are given.** You will likely reach an answering machine and will need to leave a message for the provider and they will call you back. You can tell them in a couple of sentences why you're seeking treatment. An example message could be, *"Hi Dr. Smith, my name is Susan Taylor, and I was referred to you by my insurance company. I would like to speak with you about possibly scheduling a first appointment to deal with my recent panic attacks, relationship concerns and work stress. Could you please call me back at 555-0000 at your earliest convenience?"*

### 5. **First Phone Conversation:** Remember that as a consumer you have the right to interview the psychologist/therapist thoroughly. You should begin by describing your reasons for seeking psychotherapy so that it can be determined if your needs fit with the psychologist's practice. When you speak with the therapist it will likely be a 5-15 minute discussion on the phone where you can share your concerns and ask questions about their experience working with your particular concerns, fees, insurance, etc.

#### **Some examples of questions you can ask the psychologist/therapist are:**

- What is your experience with concerns like mine? (e.g., depression, anxiety, family issues, relationship conflicts, etc.)
- What kind of counseling license do you have (PhD, PsyD, MFT, LCSW, etc)? How long have you been licensed?
- What kind of training have you had? What areas of specialty do you work with?
- What is your style of working? What is your theoretical orientation or preferred approach to therapy or counseling (Cognitive-behavioral therapy, Psychodynamic therapy, etc)? Do you tend to take an active or more passive approach in therapy?
- What is your fee? Is it negotiable? Do you have a reduced fee for students on a budget?
- Do you accept my insurance (name your insurance company)?
- Do you have openings? (If the answer is no, do you have any recommendations for other referrals?)
- How soon can you see me? How often will we meet (e.g. once a week, every other week)?

If you're comfortable with the therapist's answers, then make a first appointment. At this point, you are not making a life commitment, just an appointment. Feel free to interview a number of therapists until you find someone with whom you feel comfortable.

6. ***After the Phone Call and/or First appointment*** You may need some time after the phone call to reflect on how you felt about your contact with the counselor.

***Some questions to ask yourself:***

- Did I feel comfortable asking questions? You have a perfect right to ask questions and receive answers and should feel comfortable doing so.
- How do I feel about this person? Were they courteous, patient and reassuring? Or rude, guarded, dismissive, etc.
- Do they seem comfortable and compatible for me? Did they "get me"?
- Did they seem to have experience with and/or understand my unique concerns?
- Do they seem empathetic?

Your relationship with the therapist is important. It's important to remember that therapy is a much, much richer experience than just problem-solving. The foundation of good therapy is the relationship you and the therapist build together. Because this relationship is going to be so crucial to the effectiveness of your therapy, it is essential you find someone with whom you feel a comfortable connection, someone who makes you feel understood and accepted, a therapist who creates and maintains an environment within which you can feel safe to explore even the most deeply felt sources of pain or conflict. Choose a therapist with whom it feels very right to establish such a life-changing and life-enhancing relationship. You deserve the best possible therapy experience.

7. ***While you wait for your first appointment.*** Waiting can be hard when you are feeling emotional discomfort. If you ever experience a mental health emergency (e.g. suicidal thoughts or behaviors, lack of sleep for days, hallucinations, etc.) it is important to call a **24 Hour Mental Health Phone Hotline** and/or go to your nearest **Emergency Room**.

**National 24/7 Mental Health Hotlines:**

**1-800-784-2433**

**1-800-273-8255**

***Here are some things you can do that may possibly alleviate some of the distress you might be experiencing.***

- Stick to a routine – get dressed, go to your classes, go to meetings. Keep to the structure you normally have during your day.
- Make sure you eat healthy food regularly. Skipping meals robs you of the energy you need to use your coping resources.
- Talk to friends and family who are supportive. Isolating yourself can make things worse.
- Keep a journal of what is going on currently that you need help with – track days and times of particular feelings or problems you are experiencing.
- Get as much sleep as you need – but not too much! Most people need from 6 – 8 hours of sleep every night. Go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
- Do some kind of physical activity that you enjoy – running, swimming, playing sports, working out. Even walks around the campus and neighborhood can help you feel better emotionally and help reduce stress.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs of any kind as a way to self-medicate. This includes caffeine.
- Find activities that are relaxing or soothing to you. Listen to your favorite music, take hot baths, do meditation, paint a picture.
- Give yourself permission to not worry about your problems for part of each day. Do all your worrying for a 20 minute block of time and then immerse yourself in positive activities.
- Attend to your spirituality – go to church, synagogue, mosque or enjoy nature. Pray, read uplifting books, speak to a spiritual leader.
- Find humor in your life – spend time with those who make you laugh. Watch a funny movie or read a funny book.
- Distract yourself temporarily from your difficulties – watch TV, play a game, go window shopping.
- Try to recall what has helped you before in similar situations. Make a list of these things and do them.

\*\*This list is for informational purposes only and is not intended to diagnose or treat any conditions. It cannot substitute for a consultation with a medical or mental health professional.