

## The Mental Health Crisis on Shippensburg's Campus

It felt like a dirty little secret to be in the counseling center without my parents' knowledge. As far as they were concerned, I was fine, because I never shared my mental health struggles with them. I knew that my dad wouldn't understand, especially due to how he brushed off my asking for help in the past as me just being a girl. That was enough to keep me from ever asking for help from him again (and to inspire a [NAMI Blog post about it](#)). The fact that counseling services on campus are free for students was the primary reason that I came. Not because I didn't have insurance, but because there would be no *record* in my dad's insurance—so no one but me would know about it, and I wouldn't feel ashamed for reaching out.

“Our next available appointment is three weeks out, on Wednesday the 17th?” The lady at the front desk in the counseling center was very friendly (unlike some other secretaries that I've dealt with at other counseling centers) and because of this I didn't feel like inconveniencing her by asking for another day for my appointment. The hardest part of keeping up these secret counseling sessions was that I could only schedule appointments on the day I had class, to avoid suspicion. I accepted the appointment anyway, and—surprise— had to miss it. There weren't flexible times. I couldn't reschedule. I didn't feel like I was in a crisis situation, and I, again, was afraid of inconveniencing someone. It was a track record of mine, reason for missing one-too-many appointments in the past at other locations. There, too, if you missed one, the likelihood of rescheduling was very, very narrow. *Oh well*, I thought. *Other people have it worse. I'll be fine until the next available appointment in the spring.* And I was. I wouldn't have been if I hadn't already received counseling in the past, which gave me the tools I needed to

work through a lot of my struggles independently. But for those who have never received counseling prior to attending college, *please* don't think the way I did. Go to your appointments and be responsible with your mental health. It's just as important as your physical health.

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Shippensburg's student-to-counselor ratio is 1219:1, according to Shippensburg's Counseling Department chair, Dr. Christopher Carlton, who I reached out to through email. Wait times can vary, but there is always an influx around the end of the semester—which I believe probably has a lot to do with finals season. Dr. Carlton said that the Fall 2019 semester reached an all-time high waiting time of *five* weeks, while adding that there are counselors who are always available for students in a crisis situation, so they will not face that wait time.

This student-to-counselor ratio follows a common pattern at college campuses across the country. At the Big Ten universities, (fourteen large universities primarily in the midwestern United States) who arguably have significantly more funding for such programs, the ratio can be anywhere from 800:1 to 1200:1.

Before I transferred to Shippensburg University, such luxury of campus counseling services did not exist when I would have needed it far more than I do now. Frostburg State's satellite branch in downtown Hagerstown might offer a free therapy session at a counselor thirty minutes from my house, and then you're on your own. My other school, Hagerstown Community College, despite its rapidly growing campus and over six thousand credit-seeking students, has yet to add any sort of counseling service. The school does offer a recently launched "Behavioral Intervention/Care Team" who can make referrals to psychiatric and other services for students. For those who have no insurance: you're on your own. It's just not enough.

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If you have the privilege of private insurance, campus counseling centers may not be imperative to your livelihood. In theory, you could just go somewhere else. I spent a good six months from 2018-2019 attending therapy sessions at Brook Lane's outpatient office in Hagerstown, and thanks to my double insurances, had to pay nothing. After the six months ran out, I could no longer continue my appointments at Brook Lane unless I paid out-of-pocket, and the cost was impossible for me to cover. Similarly to the campus counseling centers, the wait times at Brook Lane and other counseling service centers in the region are just as high.

Now of course, once you're in as a regular client, you're in. It's highly unlikely that your regular therapist is going to tell you that your next appointment is a month out. Is it likely, though, that before and after your initial intake you'll be waiting awhile? Yes, a hundred times yes. I waited four weeks for my intake appointment, and another three for my first counseling session. After that, I had an appointment every two weeks, except for a few dreaded times when the weather was bad and I had to cancel. I wasn't given the privilege of rescheduling to a convenient date. I was lucky to be able to reschedule *at all*. Most of the time, if I missed, I was left waiting a month between appointments. And I needed that appointment more during the wait time than I did after it. I needed someone to talk to and had no one, and no matter how many times I called to check if there had been any cancellations to move my appointment to a closer date, there never were any. (And if there were, someone else had already beat me to it). But here's the terrifying part: I wasn't in a crisis. When I think of people who *are* in a crisis (but don't want that to be known), waiting all this time for an appointment, my heart drops at the reminder of how much they are suffering.

The tricky thing about a crisis is that a lot of people insist that they're doing better than they really are. They know, if they made it known, that they would have priority counseling appointments, but they can't help but to feel like someone else has it worse. Many mental health organizations define a mental health crisis as being suicidal or considering harming others. However, NAMI adds onto that a bit, stating, "A mental health crisis is any situation in which a person's behavior puts them at risk of hurting themselves or others and/or prevents them from being able to care for themselves or function effectively in the community." I feel like that last part is especially important. When I take that into consideration when reflecting on my own history, I think I have had more than a few crises in my teen years, and I now know what to look out for moving forward. The hard part, of course, would be convincing myself that my potential crisis is just as serious as anyone else's.

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Okay, but let's say you're not in a crisis, and you're not even severely depressed or anxious, but you just want someone to talk to or need some sort of advice and want to see a counselor at Ship: where do you fall in line? Should you feel guilty taking up a place on a massive waiting list for appointments? Shippensburg University will obviously prioritize the more serious cases, and you may be caught waiting a while for an appointment, but you will still get one. If you don't feel like waiting for an appointment, there are other options. Support groups and de-stressing events are two of my personal favorites. Support groups are a great way for people to both connect with others in similar situations as them as well as to receive support. Sometimes, all you need is to vent, to be validated and reminded that you aren't alone. And Shippensburg is great at doing that. There are all sorts of support groups on campus, including

sexual-assault survivors, abuse survivors, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Not to mention, the incredible Women's Center in Horton which does so much on campus to assist women through all sorts of situations, and Home @ Ship run by the counseling center, which allows you to connect to other students who may be feeling homesick while petting dogs, so it's a win-win.

The University of Michigan is battling their high student-low counselor ratio by offering online therapy services to their students, which limits the traffic coming into their counseling centers. Other colleges, like Frostburg State, offer a free subscription to a mindfulness app called "Pacifica", which offers mood trackers, guided meditation, and journaling to name a few. The app typically costs \$3.99 a month, so to make it accessible to students who otherwise would not have had the chance to use it was a helpful tool for me in between therapy sessions, and likely for those in need of anxiety reducing meditation, self-affirmation, or, as a last resort, something to help them sleep.

If your university doesn't offer these, I have two resources to add on that may (or may not) be of assistance. Both have helped me through some particularly rough times. The first is 7cups, which is basically a website where you can anonymously vent to a trained active listener. You may not connect well with every listener, but it does help to talk things out. The second is the Crisis Text Line (741741) which is a free service where you can speak with a trained crisis counselor while in any kind of crisis. If you don't have cellular data, you can also reach the Crisis Text Line through Facebook Messenger.

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Why is there such a long wait time for counseling appointments, other than the student-to-counselor ratio? It's not as if every single student will be going to the counselor's

office. But more and more students are starting to face mental health issues, and are seek treatment (which is a good thing!). Dr. Christopher Carlton said that there has been a 30% increase in clients at the counseling center at Shippensburg every year, and similar patterns are seen at other campuses across the country. With such a sharp influx, it can be difficult for universities to adjust to the growing needs of the community. That's not to say that Shippensburg isn't trying. Recently, two part-time counselors have been added to the staff, and Dr. Christopher Carlton added that "We have tried to emphasize the importance of viewing mental health and wellness as a campus-wide issue, rather than only a Counseling Center issue—educating faculty/staff/students about how essential it is to utilize their "human skills" to connect with students (a sense of connection is a big piece that is missing for many students who struggle)."