

Western University

Student Guide To Mental Health Services

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What is mental health?

“A state of well-being in which the individual realizes their own abilities, can reasonably cope with the stresses of life, can live, study, and work well, and is able to make a contribution to the community.” The Mental Health Commission of Canada, National Standard for Mental Health and Well-being for Post-Secondary Students, 2024¹

The World Health Organization distinguished mental health from mental health conditions this way²:

“Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development.

Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders. It exists on a complex continuum, which is experienced differently from one person to the next, with varying degrees of difficulty and distress and potentially very different social and clinical outcomes.

Mental health conditions include mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities as well as other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment in functioning, or risk of self-harm. People with mental health conditions are more likely to experience lower levels of mental well-being, but this is not always or necessarily the case.”

Mental health doesn't mean that everything is good or great all the time--that is not realistic. Rather it means that people experience and manage a range of emotions, successes, and challenges and still serve society.

Your mental health -- our shared responsibility

Achieving and maintaining mental health is a shared responsibility. Your responsibility is learning about and prioritizing healthy habits such eating, sleeping, studying, socializing, working, reflecting, exercising and seeking care early when needed. The earlier you seek care, the faster you can get back on track.

Our clinic's responsibility is to foster a safe, welcoming, and healing environment and provide accessible, compassionate care tailored to each student.

Steps you can take when stressed

There are many steps you can take when stressed. Based on what brings you joy, you can play music, write a reflection, call a friend, go for a jog, or simply take a deep breath or two. Taking a moment to calm yourself can go a long way.

There are many freely accessible apps that provide guided meditations that you might find helpful. Meditations can be as short as a minute or longer than an hour. There is no right or wrong way to meditate – simply take a break to slow down your breathing.

¹ <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/what-we-do/children-and-youth/studentstandard/>

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

At Western, there are many people to turn to when you are stressed: friends, residence sops, dons, faculty advisors, spiritual guidance (chaplaincy), faculty members, and counsellors at Western Mental Health Services.

What we do

Western Mental Health Services seeks to support students' thriving through psychotherapy. We are an interdisciplinary group of Master's level counsellors, social workers, registered psychotherapists, psychologists (PhD), and trainees who meet with students individually and in groups. We provide short-term support to help students who are experiencing stress, distress, or mental health difficulties in their lives. Our work is symptom and solution focused. Symptoms differ among students but can include sleeping and eating poorly, feeling stressed or anxious, skipping class, dropping grades due to trouble focusing, and feeling down.

We are eager to help you thrive here at Western.

If you are unsure if you should see one of our physicians or one of our counsellors

Many students' needs can be addressed by talking through issues with a therapist and they may not need to see a physician. If your goal is to talk things through, then psychotherapy may be helpful for you. If so, you have come to the right place.

Some students may need an evaluation by a physician, particularly if they are seeking a diagnostic evaluation, need medication for a mental health problem, or are medically ill. To arrange a visit with a physician, call (519) 661-3030. There are two kinds of physicians in Thames Hall: family medicine doctors and psychiatrists. Students must first see a family medicine doctor before any referral to a psychiatrist can be made.

Why you might seek counselling support with us

Adjusting to the challenges of postsecondary education can be difficult. At the same time, you are engaging in self-exploration and maturation, individuating from your family, finding friend groups, being creative, learning what excites you intellectually and learning how you learn. You are also balancing heavy academic responsibilities, particularly graduate students. You may also have an on-going psychiatric issue that benefits from counselling. There may be times that having someone to collaboratively explore your challenges can be quite helpful.

Common concerns that students describe include:

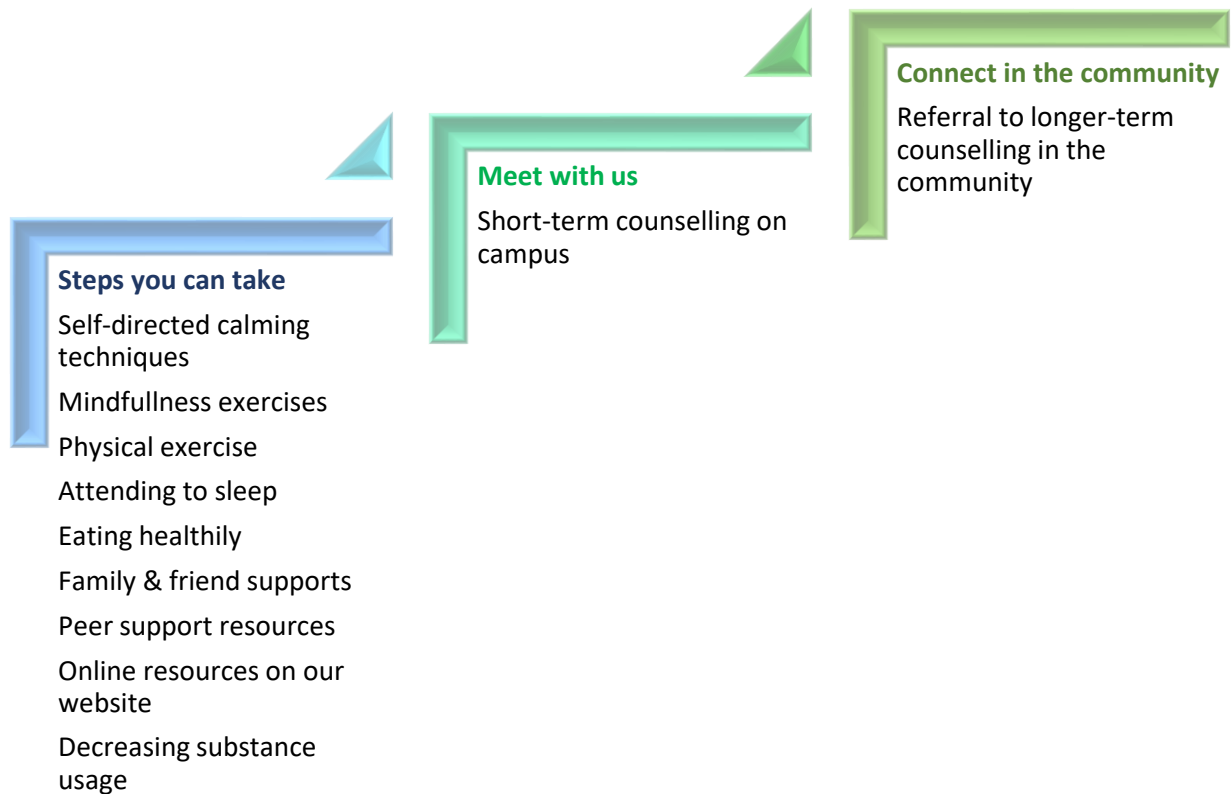
- feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and fear of failure.
- Loneliness
- Struggling with alcohol consumption or thinking that if they don't drink, they will be left out
- problems in their relationships, including with their families or roommates
- race-based stress or trauma
- oppression if they identify as 2SLGBTQ+
- interest in exploring their gender identity or orientation
- isolation if they have disabilities
- being far from home and adjusting to a new culture

- eating healthily or getting enough sleep
- having triggering thoughts from past traumas
- juggling the competing demands of being a postsecondary student

All these reasons and more are good reasons to seek help.

Our model of care

We provide care within a “stepped care” model.



“Stepped” refers to the concept that students’ care can be “stepped down” to less intensive care or “stepped up” to more intensive care, depending on the situation. We provide an initial session and collaboratively formulate a care plan with you. It may be that a single assessment session is sufficient to help you take additional steps to support your well-being on your own. For some students, a few more sessions may be needed. In general, we are resourced to provide up to six sessions in any academic year. Some students may require more intensive services. In those cases, the student will be “stepped up” and provided with some community resources to arrange follow up.

It may also be that another student support service on campus is better positioned to help you. You may be encouraged to seek medical care from one of our family medicine colleagues or academic accommodations through Academic Support & Engagement, for example. If you have multiple challenges across a range of issues, our Student Support & Case Management (SSCM) team may be the next best step for you.

Appointment types

There are four different types of appointments:

- walk-in or crisis appointment
- initial appointment
- follow-up appointment
- group meeting

Walk-in or crisis appointments: A student may come to Thames Hall when we are open to see a counsellor when in crisis, often within a few minutes of registering. We strive to be available to you as much as possible when you need us the most.

Initial appointments: Initial visits are for non-urgent issues. You can schedule them by calling reception or booking online in advance and are often available within 24 hours of the request.

Follow-up appointments: Follow-up appointments can be booked at the end of the counselling session, when you are ready to be seen again by calling reception, or by booking online. Our model is short-term, meaning that students can be seen up to six times in follow-up.

Groups: Group meetings allow you to learn from your peer students. We have a list of group support opportunities on our website. You are welcome to self-refer or someone may suggest a group to you. To participate in group support, your file will first be reviewed by the group leader. You may meet with the leader in advance. This is done to ensure that the group is right for you and that you will be able to positively contribute to the group. There are times in which a group leader may first recommend individual work before joining the group.

Before seeing us, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire, provide emergency contact information, and sign a confidentiality agreement. A confidentiality agreement describes that we will keep your information confidential unless there are exceptional circumstances. If your appointment is virtual, there will be an additional form.

What happens in the walk-in or initial visit

A walk-in or crisis appointment is one in which we strive to see you as soon as possible—often within minutes—after your arrival at Thames Hall. Our discussion will be focused on what is worrying you and ensuring your safety. An initial visit is different. During an initial visit we will explore themes and how you are doing more broadly.

For us to help you, we will need to get to know you. We will need to know what your goals are for the session and how you think you can be best helped. This may be your first experience with therapy, and you might not know what your goals are. Not to worry—we will help you figure that out. We will ask about the concern(s) that brought you to seek counselling support and what might help improve your situation. We will explore how things have been going for you lately, such as how your academic life is going; your sleeping and eating habits; how you are managing day-to-day life; your family background; mental health challenges you may have faced in the past; and current substance usage, if any. The questions are designed to help us understand you, but you may not be comfortable answering them on any particular day. You have the choice and control over what you would like to disclose to your counsellor and can choose not to answer any of the questions your counsellor asks. It is your story, your choice.

We will also ask how you are feeling right now, how your mood is, and, importantly, we ask all students about whether they have thoughts of hurting themselves. We may involve our physician partners to assess thoughts of hurting yourself.

After we have explored the challenges you are facing, we will collaboratively provide guidance for your next steps.

The appointment will take about 50 minutes to an hour.

Our counsellors may need to confer with their supervisor or colleague to best support you. That is quite common in mental health care. You may be seen by one of our interns. Please know that they are supervised by a staff member here and the intern will discuss your story with the supervisor.

You may only need that first initial appointment to get back on track. We believe that you will find our counsellors kind and empathic listeners who care about your well-being.

If you think you need to be seen right away (walk-in or crisis appointment)

Some issues can wait a day or two and in other cases you should ask to be seen right way. We have walk-in or crisis slots available throughout the day. To be seen as a walk-in or in crisis, either call reception (519) 661-3030 or come to Thames Hall room 2170. We will do our best to see you as soon as possible.

What constitutes a crisis? People have different thresholds, but some examples include:

- if you are thinking of hurting yourself or someone else
- if you are having trouble getting out of bed in the morning
- if you are concerned about the choices you are about to make or are about to engage in risky behavior
- if you aren't eating well or unable to function like you need to

These and others are all good reasons to walk-in to be seen right away in our clinic.

Who may access our services

We are eager to support you. Actively enrolled students of Western, Huron, or King's may access counselling care here for free. Most students who have left Western or graduated may access care for up to six months. Graduate students on a leave from Western may also access our care.

If you live in residence or are enrolled in engineering, law, or Schulich, you can also receive services at those sites.

There may be times in which we feel that we do not have the appropriate resources to best meet your mental health needs, despite our desire to help you. In those cases, we may suggest a variety of alternative resources for you to explore to support your mental health. We strive to point you in the direction we believe is best suited for you.

In rare instances and at the discretion of clinic leadership, if your behavior doesn't align with Western's values of mutual respect and zero tolerance for harassment, you may not be allowed to receive care here.

How to connect with us

The first step in connecting with us is registering in the health clinic in Thames Hall by calling (519) 661-3030 or coming to reception in room 2170.

You will need to register before you can book any appointment.

Booking an appointment online

To book an initial mental health appointment with a counsellor online, please go to https://www.uwo.ca/health//psych/book_an_appointment.html. An initial appointment is defined as the first time you ask to see one of our counsellors per academic year.

You will receive an email asking you to complete a brief survey of goals for the visit and a consent form. These need to be completed before you are seen. We want to make sure that we discuss what is important to you.

Booking subsequent counselling appointments

You can ask your counsellor about booking a follow-up appointment for you while you are in session, call (519) 661-3030, or come to reception.

Hours of operation

- September – April: Monday through Thursday, 9:00 am to 7:00 pm; Friday 9:00 am to 5:00 pm.
- May – August: Monday through Friday, 9:00 am to 4:00 pm.

Students are not seen on site outside of those hours; virtual appointments will rarely extend beyond those hours. Should we need to close our clinic for some reason, we will post that information on our website <https://www.uwo.ca/health//shs/index.html>.

Reaching your counsellor

If you need to reach your counsellor, you may call reception at (519) 661-3030 and they will ensure that the message gets to them. Please do not attempt to reach the counsellors via their phones or their regular UWO email addresses.

You may send documents or other information to shscnsel@uwo.ca. We will ensure that your counsellor receives this information.

Additional information

Virtual care

Our preference is to see you in-person. However, when that is not possible, you may be seen virtually with some caveats. Due to our counsellors' licensure restrictions, to see the majority of counsellors and all of our social workers, you need to be physically located in Ontario. We are not able to see any students physically located at the time of the session in Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, or Nova Scotia. At the start of every virtual counselling session, you will be asked for the address where you are physically located. This is to ensure that the counsellor is licensed to see you at that address and so that they can initiate help in case of an emergency.

If you get disconnected during the session, log back in to reconnect or call reception to figure out next steps. The session can always be rebooked.

We take precautions to preserve your confidentiality and comfort during a virtual session but there are limits due to the nature of the appointment. Body language is more difficult to observe with online communications, so non-verbal cues can be difficult to discern. Sometimes the connection quality can be poor, choppy, or inconsistent. We can stop the session and ask for clarification if there has been a misunderstanding. You are responsible for the technological devices (i.e., computer, cell phone, camera, and microphone), software and services necessary (Wi-Fi service or mobile data) to access the online appointment. You are also responsible for ensuring that your desire for privacy and confidentiality at your location is within your comfort zone.

If you are late for your appointment

Please arrive on time. We will be happy to see you within 15 minutes of your scheduled appointment time but may not be able to see you if you arrive later. If you are late and in crisis, we will arrange for you to see your scheduled therapist or someone else. If you call our reception team to let us know that you will be more than 15 minutes late, they will assist in rescheduling the appointment for you.

If you miss your appointment

We understand that emergencies arise and occasionally a student will miss an appointment. As we strive to be available for any student who needs help, if you miss your appointment without canceling it, you will be charged \$20 for the missed appointment. To minimize the impact of missed appointments or “no shows”, unless you are in crisis, we will offer to rebook you in a couple of weeks.

Limits to confidentiality

In general, your counsellor will keep what you say confidential, consistent with the Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/04p03>) and the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA, <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90f31>). By confidential, we mean that it can be shared with your circle of care, the counsellor’s supervisor, and documented in the medical record. Your circle of care includes the nurses, physicians, and counsellors involved in caring for you. Only members of your clinical care team can access your record.

There are a few exceptions to this. If you present as a risk to yourself or others or your behavior deteriorates to the point that you are unable to care for yourself, then the counsellor will need to disclose to more people to ensure yours and others’ safety. These may include Western Special Constable Service, London’s emergency response teams, and other health professionals. Other exceptions include our requirement to report any concern of potential harm to a child or someone residing a long-term care facility; protecting Western employees from workplace violence or harassment (if the student is also a Western employee); complying with court-ordered subpoenas; and being a victim of sexual abuse by a healthcare provider (we have duty to inform the provider’s college but don’t have to reveal your identity).

If you need a support letter for academic relief

We know that meeting all of the academic requirements can be difficult on occasion. Our counsellors can provide a support letter for academic relief; they are unable to sign a student medical certificate. Academic relief is determined by your academic department or advisor, not our clinic. Letters of

support written by our counsellors do not guarantee that academic relief will be granted. Moreover, please note that not all requests for a support letter can be granted. Letters will not include specific dates you can't engage in academic work, provide a diagnosis nor prognosis, nor provide an academic recommendation.

Our counsellors can write the dates that you attended your appointments here and the general themes discussed. Specifics are not included to protect your privacy and confidentiality. Our counsellors consider each request on a case-by-case basis. Our goal is to help you engage fully in your academic activities.

If you would like a copy of your medical records

If you would like a copy of your medical record, please email health@uwo.ca. It may take up to 30 days to complete the request. If, instead of your entire record, you only wish to have a list of dates seen or a summary of the psychotherapy sessions, please indicate that on the request and we will do our best.

If you don't think your counsellor is a good fit for you

Meeting with the same counselor over time can help build a trusting therapeutic relationship. Infrequently, a student can feel like the counsellor isn't a good fit for them. That happens and "fit" is important in the therapeutic process. If this occurs, you can request to be seen by another counsellor by calling reception at (519) 661-3030 and request to change counsellors.

Additional community-based resources

- Suicide crisis helpline: dial 9-8-8 for mental health support from anywhere in Canada
- Western Special Constable Service (non-emergency) (519) 661-3300
- CMHA Mental Health & Addictions Crisis Centre (519) 434-9191 in-person crisis supports at 648 Huron St., London
- Good2Talk – Confidential Helpline Phone 1 (866) 925-5454 or text "GOOD2TALKON" to 686868. Good2Talk provides 24-hour confidential support services for post-secondary students in Ontario.
- Reach Out 24/7 (519) 433-2023, 24-hour phone crisis assistance
- Anova crisis line (519) 642-3000
- Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Treatment Program at St. Joseph's (519) 646-6100, ext 64224