

Mental Health Providers Are Busier Than Ever. Here's How to Find One.

Tips and tricks to get help now.



By Christina Caron

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Finding a therapist — let alone one who is a good fit — can take time and determination, especially during the pandemic, when many therapists report they cannot keep up with demand and must turn away patients.

When The New York Times surveyed 1,320 mental health professionals in November, nine out of 10 therapists said the number of people seeking care was on the rise. During a Senate committee hearing in February to address the nation's growing mental health and substance abuse problem, Senator Patty Murray of Washington noted that nearly 130 million Americans live in places with less than one mental health care provider per 30,000 people.

Even therapists can have trouble finding help. Thomas Armstrong, a clinical psychologist in eastern Washington, waited more than a year to get treatment for his youngest child, who was 2 when they started searching. And it took more than two years to get the treatment that proved most beneficial, found only after he tapped into his academic network through Twitter.

"All the stars had to align for me," he said.

If you are looking for a mental health care provider, don't give up — there are several strategies that can help.

Phone a friend.

For some people — like those suffering from a debilitating bout of depression — the thought of spending weeks or months searching for a therapist can seem overwhelming.

"It's not something you're doing wrong — it's that the system is inherently broken and it needs fixing," Jessi Gold, a psychiatrist at Washington University in St. Louis, said.

If you don't have the energy to get started, ask a friend or family member to help you contact providers and set up an appointment, Dr. Gold suggested. It is "one of the best ways that people who care about you can help with your mental health," she added.

You can also try getting referrals directly from your personal network — whether it is someone from your local parenting group, your friend's therapist, an obstetrician, your primary care doctor or a trusted colleague. For students, referrals can also come from on-campus counseling centers, health centers or a guidance counselor.

Jeanie W. Shiau, a licensed clinical social worker in Georgia whose practice is usually about 90 percent full, often helps find providers for patients she cannot see individually.

Her philosophy, she said, is that "connecting folks with resources is part of our 'rent' for being human on this planet."



Charity Rachelle for The New York Times

Take a chance on a provider who is new to the field.

One of the best places to call is your local university's psychology clinic, which trains graduate students, said Margaret E. Crane, a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Temple University whose dissertation compares strategies to help caregivers seek therapy for youth anxiety.

These clinics offer evidence-based treatments to both children and adults, she added, and they often have shorter wait lists than community clinics or therapists in private practice. "They also can provide you with high-quality referrals in the area," she said.

You might also consider working with someone who has obtained a degree but is still gathering the supervised experience needed to earn a professional license. These clinicians are usually less expensive, and their work is continually being reviewed by a more experienced therapist.

Finally, when looking for a provider, don't assume that a higher degree equates to better therapy. Keep in mind that most licensed therapists in the United States — like licensed clinical social workers and licensed professional counselors — have master's degrees, not doctoral degrees.

"Rather than looking for a specific degree, look for therapists who have been trained in evidence-based treatments like cognitive behavioral therapy," Ms. Crane said.

Check your employee benefits.

Arniece Stevenson, 34, a graduate student in Philadelphia who works for the Girl Scouts, used her Employee Assistance Program, or E.A.P., to locate a therapist faster than she ever expected.

An E.A.P. is a free intervention program that can help employees resolve personal problems by connecting them with the right resources, and may also provide a small number of free therapy sessions.

E.A.P.s are billed as confidential, but some employees feel wary of contacting them because of privacy concerns. Ms. Stevenson was hesitant, but she finally reached out one evening around midnight. “I just had to muster up the courage,” she said.

The person she spoke with said someone would be calling her back soon. The following day she heard from a therapist who could begin seeing her right away.

“I was shocked — I was like, ‘Wait, already?’” she said.

The therapist she sees is white, and Ms. Stevenson, who is Black, said she would have preferred a provider who was African American. But the two of them “happened to click,” Ms. Stevenson added.

Explore digital directories and virtual options.

Many people start searching for a provider by scrolling through their insurance company’s list of providers, then cross-referencing those against another database like Psychology Today to learn more about each practitioner.

The insurance company’s list may not be up to date, however, and some providers may not respond to your queries because they are already full.

It may be more efficient in some cases to look at free online directories where you can filter results by who is currently taking new clients. Options include Alma, ZocDoc, Monarch and Headway.

Companies like BetterHelp, 7 Cups of Tea and Talkspace offer online therapy and messaging with a licensed practitioner for a weekly or monthly membership fee.

And if you’re specifically looking for a provider of color, a variety of websites have popped up in recent years to help make those connections, including Therapy for Black Girls, LatinxTherapy and the National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network.

Look to nonprofits.

Nonprofits focused on helping specific groups can also aid people in finding a therapist.

Examples include the Beacon Tree Foundation, which assists parents in Virginia who have children with mental illness; the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention; and the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

Postpartum Support International took just two days to connect Melanie Vega, 39, with a provider on her insurance panel when she developed postpartum depression after the birth of her first child.

“I knew that something was wrong when I kept saying to myself my family would be better off without me,” said Ms. Vega, who has now been seeing that therapist for four years. “She has helped me tremendously.”

Other helpful nonprofits include The Trevor Project, which offers trained counselors to L.G.B.T.Q. youth; the Trans Lifeline; Black Men Heal; and the Asian Mental Health Collective.

What if you don't have insurance?

Some therapists are open to charging sliding-scale fees based on a patient's income, so don't hesitate to ask. And check out the nonprofits Open Path Collective and Therapy4thePeople for directories of therapists who charge as little as \$30 a session.

Sesame also provides low-cost mental health consultations that do not require insurance.

Community-based mental health programs are another option. You can search for these via the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's treatment locator.

You can often find free or low-cost programs at local hospitals and medical schools as well.

FindTreatment.gov helps people locate treatment for substance use disorders and includes information on which organizations offer payment assistance.

If there is a crisis, do not wait.

Those who have tried to harm themselves — or are in the process of doing so — should go to an emergency room or call 911.

If you or a loved one are having thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255 (TALK); en Español: 1-888-628-9454; for the deaf and hard of hearing: Dial 711, then 1-800-273-8255.

You can also text HOME to 741-741 to be connected with a trained crisis counselor and receive free support via text message from the Crisis Text Line.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness has information on other types of mental health crisis services, like mobile crisis teams and crisis stabilization units. And a list of additional resources can be found at [SpeakingofSuicide.com/resources](https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/resources).

Christina Caron is a reporter for the Well section, covering mental health and the intersection of culture and health care. Previously, she was a parenting reporter, general assignment reporter and copy editor at The Times. [More about Christina Caron](#)