Counselling FAQs

On this page you can find answer to frequently asked questions about our UNSW Counselling and Psychological Services [CAPS].

Who can use the CAPS services?
CAPS provides counselling and psychological services to all enrolled UNSW students.

What is counselling?
Attending for a counselling consultation provides an opportunity to talk with a professional who has qualifications, professional registration and has undergone supervised training. As professionals they are able to listen closely to your needs, provide knowledge, and experience, offer strategies, support and new perspectives and sometimes advice to assist you resolve or manage your situation.

A counselling consultation is designed to provide time, space and encouragement to reflect, clarify and generally explore at depth, the triggers, behaviours, thoughts and understandings that you identify within your personal cultural and academic contexts that add to your concerns and/or distress or impact on your mood and/or relationships.

In short, counselling consultations will provide you with a safe space in which to reflect upon your circumstances and can clarify problems and help your find your way to their resolution.

During a counselling consultation people often find that they learn more about themselves, their situation, and their choices than they can without the expertise provided by the counsellor. The relationship with the counsellor will also provide structure and caring support for you in distressing times.

The counsellor will work with you respecting your values, choices and lifestyle, and assist you work towards the choices or changes that fit for you and your circumstances.

During the counselling consultation you will be encouraged to:

- Bring more clarity to your problems/concerns/feelings/relationships
- Generate options available to you within your situation
- Identify what you would like to be different
- Identify the changes needed to achieve that difference that are within your control
- Provide strategies, information, support and encouragement as you work towards your goal

Will counselling help?
- A counselling consultation offers a safe non-judgemental relationship that friends or family cannot always provide.
- A counsellor will draw on expertise arising from relevant research and evidence based psychological approaches that are not usually available to family and friends.
- Your concern does not need to be overwhelming in order for you to find benefit from a counselling consultation. Seeking a counselling consultation is a useful place to start when looking for more options or a solution to life circumstances or how you are feeling.
- People who engage in the counselling process often report it useful even if sometimes they found some of the process challenging.
- A counselling consultation can lighten the stress and emotional load: Remember the old saying: ‘a burden shared
is a burden halved’?

Students share many aspects of their lives and explore what is troubling them in their counselling consultations. There are a number of themes that are frequently part of the conversations:

- Transitioning to university: from school, the workforce or from another geographical region, a different culture or a different first language
- Relationship difficulties: with family members, flatmates, study group members, assessment team members, friends, colleagues. Topics include lack of confidence socially, managing conflict or challenges, communication styles, managing commitment, jealousy, abusive behaviour
- Family issues involving: Parents, Partners, children, parenting, being a ‘carer’, relationship separation and divorce, homesickness, financial complications, sexual difficulties, alcohol or drug use by a family member, impact of gambling, impact of mental ill health on family
- Challenging life experiences: Trauma, sexual abuse, violent assault, unwanted pregnancy, serious health problems
- Lack of confidence: Worried about failing, never being good enough, feeling judged
- Depression/Anxiety/Stress/Psychological Distress: Panic, Feeling overwhelmed, feeling isolated, lonely, empty, tearful, unloved, suicidal feelings/plans, self-harm behaviour, frightened by the strength of emotional reactions, frustration and anger
- Repeated destructive behaviour: Binge eating, self-harming, abusive relationships, overusing alcohol or drugs, addictive behaviours
- Exam and study stress: Perfectionism and procrastination, Feeling overwhelmed academically, time and task management, exam and performance anxiety, underperformance
- Bereavement: Loss, anger, loneliness, sadness & depression

Take a look at more information about the issues students are concerned with.

What if the counsellor does not have the expertise?

The counsellor can also direct you to other services that may be useful to you.

If you need more specialised or more intensive therapy than CAPS can provide you will be given a letter of referral to a GP or an outside service for additional treatment or support. Most external services will charge a fee.

Does seeing a counsellor mean I am mentally ill?

No, seeing a counsellor doesn't mean you have a mental illness. However, there are some symptoms that do call for additional medical assessment. If such symptoms are identified the counsellor will ensure that you have appropriate information, referral to appropriate practitioners and follow-up support.

The counsellor will treat you with respect and care no matter what your concerns or symptoms.

What do I have to say in a counselling session?

Some people start by saying a lot at once and others offer a brief description. There is no right or wrong way to begin.

What you say is totally up to you. You might find yourself feeling safe enough to say more than you expected to and conversely people find it also okay to be silent at times. The counsellor will help you toward your expression of your experiences and will keep checking with you to clarify the understanding that is forming between the two of you.

Will the counsellor give me advice?

The purpose of counselling is to help you make your own decisions and for you to learn to be a wise guide for your own actions.

A counsellor might give ‘advice’ when they are concerned that your actions might be self-defeating, perpetuating a problem or damaging to a relationship that is important to you. They will work to explore the values that you want to inform your own behaviour and decision making. They may offer feedback on how others have successfully dealt with similar problems/situations.
A counsellor may also make suggestions that draw on their own expertise to add to your own considerations. Your counsellor will encourage you to be assertive in the counselling consultation and will want to know if their suggestions, strategies or approaches are not helpful. They will want to know if they are on the wrong track so they can make some correction to their approach or style.

Do I have to pay?

CAPS is part of the UNSW student support system provided to help you make the most of your studies. Each counselling consultation at CAPS is offered free of charge to current students of UNSW.

What will the counsellor think of me? Will I be judged?

All human beings experience life’s ups and downs. 1 in 4 people experience mental ill health at some point in their lives and all of us experience psychological distress in relation to challenging life situations.

Counsellors are exposed to the consequences of being human both in their own lives and through their work. They understand that many people get caught in the negative consequences of judgement and work to show you that holding a non-judgemental attitude and extending compassion reduces distress.

Doesn’t asking for help admit failure?

Early help seeking can reduce the experience of failure and build strength and confidence. Everyone makes mistakes (some with challenging consequences and some with short term inconvenience) and we all have an opportunity to accept that we often don’t ‘get it right’.

We have a right to learn from our experiences (both positive and negative) and to understand that often we need several attempts before we can overcome some obstacles. Looking for, being open to, and accepting help and support can only assist this process of learning.

Success is often experienced in company and with support. Suffering alone with a challenge is not a burden to impose on yourself. Seeking a conversation with someone often means you have taken the first difficult step on the road to resolving the problem. Consider this a sign of wisdom and strength.

How confidential is counselling?

Counsellors work to a strict Code of Ethics which means they must inform you of the limits of confidentiality and then stick to these rules.

However, if you are worried about the implications of any breach of confidentiality you may wish to:

- Speak to a counsellor in general terms first in order to see how the privacy and confidentiality requirements may apply to your particular situation.
- Seek anonymous help through a telephone line.

What if I definitely want to see a male or female counsellor?

The counselling service has both male and female counsellors and may be able to accommodate this preference. Ask when you make first contact.

Who are the counsellors?

The counsellors are all psychologists or provisional psychologists in training.

Is counselling like psychiatry?

Psychologists and psychiatrists both deal with cognitive, behavioural, emotional and relational processes.
Psychiatrists are medical doctors, who work largely through diagnosis of illness and then by prescribing a treatment - usually involving medication.

Psychologists/Counsellors are normally non-medical professionals, who bring together the evidenced based strategies of the talking and behavioural therapies. Psychologists/Counsellors can however recognize the symptoms of severe mental distress, and may suggest you consider medical help if this is appropriate.

How many times will I need to see a counsellor?

Student patterns of usage are:

- Approximately 6-8% of students enrolled each year at UNSW will attend a CAPS counselling consultation
- 50-60% of students attending CAPS will attend for 1-2 contacts with a counsellor
- 40-50% of students attending CAPS will attend for more than 2 contacts with a counsellor
- Research literature on psychotherapy and counselling tells us that >75% of clients who attend for 1-2 contacts get what they want from the counselling
- CAPS data tells us that 95% of students attend for 6 contacts or fewer with a counsellor
- The average number of contacts per student at UNSW CAPS is 2.5
- In university counselling services in Australia and New Zealand the average number of appointments per student lies between 2.5 and 3.9. Across these institutions 47% limit the number of counselling contacts per students to 4 to 10
- It is impossible to predict accurately which student will attend for only one consultation with a counsellor and which students will attend for more
- The pattern of consultations with a counsellor may change over time and many students will attend as needed across the time that they are enrolled at uni.

What can I expect?

1. You will be treated with respect
2. You will receive a clear explanation of how CAPS provides counselling and psychological services
3. Your consent for any service will be sought by the counsellor prior to and during the contact with your counsellor
4. You will receive an explanation about the nature and limits of confidentiality
5. The goals that you and your counsellor are focusing on will be clear to you and agreed by you
6. You will receive competent and professional counselling
7. An estimate of the number of contacts required to achieve your goals will be discussed
8. You will receive your CAPS counselling and workshops free of charge
9. As appropriate alternative options for seeking psychological services will be provided either on request or as part of a discussion related to referral options
10. Information for self-help/alternative treatment options provided in leaflets or online resources
11. You will receive a service free from harassment (including sexual harassment) and discrimination
12. You will be shown respect for your cultural background and language tradition

What can I do to make the most of my counselling conversation?

1. Be as open and honest as you can when telling your counsellor your problem or concern
2. Be as active in your participation in the counselling process as you can be, including doing your best to undertake agreed tasks between sessions
3. Ask questions to clarify anything you don’t understand, and let the counsellor know if there is anything you don’t agree with or like about the counselling process or the impact on you
4. Respect the privacy and confidentiality of others. Treat any knowledge of others attending the service with respect and remember that any information shared by others during CAPS workshops or group programs is given in confidence unless stated otherwise
5. Demonstrate respect and consideration to staff and other service clients
6. Make an effort to be punctual in your attendance at individual sessions and workshops
7. Keep appointments where possible and give the CAPS reception staff as much notice as you can if you are unable to attend
Documentation to support special consideration/withdrawal

Are you looking for documentation from a CAPS counsellor to support an application for Special Consideration and/or Withdrawal (without academic and/or financial penalty) from courses or programs?

A CAPS counsellor is best able to provide support when the issues interfering with academic performance are high levels of stress, mental health issues, significant relationship issues or traumatic or life changing (significant) life events. However, if you have a GP or another health practitioner (psychiatrist, psychologist), or you have confided in a member of the clergy or a spiritual advisor they may be able to offer support for a timely special consideration application.

Please note: approval for special consideration will, in most cases, be at the discretion of the lecturer. There may also be Faculty and/or School based rules governing the application for, and the granting of, special consideration. For further information see Special Consideration and Fee Remission/Withdrawal.