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Concerned about confidential counseling ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I go to a college that offers free counseling to students. While I would like to take advantage of this, I feel that my pride is getting in the way of getting any help that I may need. I'm afraid of someone seeing me walk into the office, and someone seeing me in the waiting room of the office as well. (The door is left open). Any ideas on how I go about this? I'm also worried because a guy I know and work with, also works in there. He is the obnoxious, jock-type and going in there while he is working, is a concern of mine — also, if he sees that I have an appointment.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Kudos to you for being self-aware and acknowledging the barriers currently preventing you from seeking counseling. Overcoming feelings of judgment is challenging, but it may help to keep in mind that others' preconceived notions of you can be based on what they believe to be true and not on factual information. The stigma (personal, social, or cultural) you may be experiencing is common for many college students who seek mental health services. Remember, you're not alone; mental and emotional stressors are some of the most common concerns that college students face. Fortunately, there are multiple ways to access these services while maintaining your privacy, whether it's by scheduling an appointment by phone, asking the office to make accommodations for you, or seeking out another resource. Recognizing and seeking the support you need for your mental health has the potential to make a big difference in your life.

Regarding your concerns about privacy, your information is protected by state and federal laws such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) ^[2]. These regulations generally prevent individuals and institutions from sharing your medical and mental health information without your consent. While the person you know may work there, they legally aren't supposed to share that information with others. As for in-person run-ins, you may want to try asking the counseling office to make accommodations to suit you. Some suggestions include:

- Asking the office to close the waiting room door.
- Contacting the mental health professionals who work there to schedule an appointment when that student isn't working.

- Check to see if your school has counseling sessions that are offered off-site that are still associated with your campus counseling service. Some schools offer drop-in office hours at various locations around campus.
- Trying other counseling methods, such as a phone counseling session, instead of an in-person one.

Alternatively, you may be able to seek counseling through a different resource. Some colleges offer peer counseling services where students are able to call in anonymously or chat online with a peer counselor. If your school doesn't have its own peer counseling program, perhaps you could contact a similar program at another institution to see if they're able to help you. There are also free clinics located in most major cities where they offer fairly comprehensive health services, usually including counseling. You may want to search online for free or low-cost counseling in your area or perhaps your school's counseling office could provide you with more information on local resources.

Whether you decide to make the appointment at your school's counseling center, or pursue other avenues of help, seeking support when you need it can help improve your life and better cope with life's curveballs. There are many avenues for seeking help; the first one you try may set you on the path to growth and better functioning, or you may want to try a few different providers to find the best fit. If the first one you meet isn't the right fit, providers are generally happy to make recommendations to help you find someone who more closely meets your needs.

Hope this helps,

Alice!

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