



Get Beyond Stigma and Find the Help You Need

Tips for Seeking Therapy for the First Time

The pandemic continues to impact our daily lives and virtually everyone is experiencing some type of mental health challenge. Economic woes, grief, isolation, loneliness, or fear of contracting COVID are causing mental health concerns for people who have not experienced these issues in the past.

Mark O'Brien, LCSW-R, Erie County Commissioner of Mental Health, says there is no shame in seeking help for a very human condition. There are many things to be anxious about and most people are experiencing a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. Seeing a therapist and getting counseling can be the first step towards improving mental health and there is no better time to begin treatment.

"Behavioral health services don't have to be in person – the pandemic has hastened the future with telehealth," he said.

"For people who are too anxious or depressed to leave their homes, they can participate in teletherapy from the comfort of their own home. All they need is a computer or phone."

"When discussing the stigma of mental illness, there is stigma and internal perceived stigma," O'Brien said. "Stigma is the societal message that something is wrong with you and the internal stigma may add additional feelings of hopelessness and helplessness."

According to O'Brien, people need hope, purpose and connection. Even introverts are social beings, and we all derive positive benefits from relationships and interactions with each other. All these basic needs are being negatively impacted by the lingering pandemic.



If you are seeking counseling for the first time, you are not alone. The following information may help you find help that will positively impact your mental wellness.

How to find a therapist:

- If you are in crisis, call Crisis Services at 716-834-3131 or the 24-Hour Addiction Hotline at 716-831-7007
- Mental Health Advocates of WNY for linkage to community resources, providers and treatment services. Call 716-886-1242 or visit mhawny.org.
- Erie County Department of Mental Health offers a [list of behavioral health agencies](#).
- Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition [resource page](#) lists agencies offering mental health providers.

Referrals are not needed and most insurances are accepted for mental health treatment. Many operate on a sliding scale for patients without insurance.

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Why choose therapy?

Psychotherapy, or talk therapy, is a way to help people with a broad variety of mental health issues and emotional difficulties. Therapy can address troubling symptoms so a person can function better and heal.

According to O'Brien, anxiety and depression, the two most common mental health issues, are the most amenable to talk therapy without medication. Older adults, adults and adolescents can benefit from therapy.

What to expect at the first appointment?

The therapist will get to know the patient and discuss their presenting symptoms. It's helpful to make a good connection and develop a sense of rapport. New patients will complete a personal history questionnaire and explain what they hope to get out of therapy.

Confidentiality and therapist relationships:

Confidentiality is an important part of therapy. All sessions are confidential. Individuals must sign a consent for the release of information to be shared with anyone outside the provider or agency. The only exception is when the individual is at risk of hurting themselves or someone else.

According to Karl Shallowhorn, chair of the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition, having a good therapeutic relationship is important.

"When seeking treatment, it's important to feel comfortable with the therapist and that you are able to be open and honest in your sessions. It's okay to seek help elsewhere if you feel that there isn't a good "fit" between the two of you."

"Have patience – it can take time to work through some of the issues that are presented in therapy. Recovery can be hard work. But by being open to the process and having the willingness to change, it is possible to get positive results," Shallowhorn said.

There are a variety of therapeutic models that therapists use: CBT (*Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*), *Interpersonal Therapy*, *Dialectical Behavioral Therapy*, *EMDR*, *Family Systems Therapy*, *Person Centered Therapy*, and *Solution-Focused Brief Therapy* to name but a few. Each one of these is designed to treat a variety of mental health conditions with its own unique approach.

The Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition's mission is to stop the stigma surrounding mental health. People share their stories, their struggles, and their successes to encourage others and remind them that they are not alone. Help is available and recovery is possible. ■

Preparing for Therapy What You Need to Know

These are difficult times for us all. Mental health disorders are on the rise countrywide given the COVID-19 pandemic and current political climate. The silver lining may be that the stigma of mental illness is decreasing and more people are seeking help than ever before. It is possible to come out of this pandemic healthier than you started it, and therapy can be the first step of that journey.

1. It can be awkward.

Anxiety disorders affect 18% of the US population every year, so it's natural to dread talking about your intimate problems with someone new. Therapists are aware of that discomfort and self-consciousness and well trained to help you open up.

2. You are brave.

Admitting that you need to go to therapy and then actually following through is difficult. Less than half the population living with a mental health challenge actually follow through with treatment. Be proud of yourself for taking this step.

3. Be honest with your therapist.

It can be challenging to talk about things you're struggling with. Chances are, you won't be telling your therapist the wildest thing they've ever heard. You must be honest about your struggles to access proper care.

4. Keep an open mind.

Some of the meditations and mantras you learn in therapy seem silly, especially when your therapist is guiding you through them. But these simple exercises can help when you're alone and struggling with day-to-day life.

5. Be honest with yourself.

Your first therapist may not be the right fit for you and that's okay. So many people have a bad first experience and give up hope. There are a plethora of different types of therapists and treatments and sometimes you must try a few different options before you find what's best for you.

Bridget McNally is the community outreach coordinator at Mental Health Advocates of WNY. She is a trained information & referral specialist and coordinates the adult support groups at the agency.

BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

Does your organization, church, temple, or community group want to combine forces with our organization? Do you individually want to engage with us to stop the stigma of mental illness? Please consider becoming a member of our Coalition by completing our membership form at letstalkstigma.org/support/pledge.

It is going to take a massive community effort to move the needle on stigma, please become a part of the solution. Questions? Please contact Karl Shallowhorn, Chairperson, at kshallowhorn@chcb.net.

February Events

FEBRUARY 5, 10, 17, 24

Teen Peer Support Group
Mental Health Advocates of WNY

FEBRUARY 5, 19

20-Something Online Support Group
Mental Health Advocates of WNY

February 11, 25

Online Family Support Groups
Mental Health Advocates of WNY

February 16

Headway's Virtual Support Groups
and Caregiver Virtual Support Groups
Headway of WNY, Inc.

February 22

NAMI Family-to-Family

February

People Inc. Senior Companion
"Phone Connection" Program
Accepting Recipients

During these unpredictable times, visit our events page at
LETSTALKSTIGMA.ORG/EVENTS
For information about mental wellness, stigma and self-care.

A Q&A with WNY Heroes, Inc.

This month's featured member is WNY Heroes, Inc. We recently spoke to **Chris Kreiger Sr., Iraq War Veteran and President and Co-Founder of the organization.**

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



Why did your organization become a member of The Anti-Stigma Coalition?

Being a Veteran organization, we see and deal with the stigma on a daily basis. Partnering with The Anti-Stigma Coalition made sense. Working together as a team for the greater good means bigger success, better success and providing more options for those who seek treatment. Between our Peer to Peer program (Operation BOOTS) and Pawsitive for Heroes service dog program, we look to combat that stigma while giving hope and sustaining dignity at the same time. We see that even being in financial hardship also impacts someone's mental health. Having said that, all of our programs, when you think about it, are to ease anxiety, stress, depression, PTSD or thoughts of suicide. We are here to provide that hand up, not a handout.

How are veterans with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

Veterans dealing with mental health for many if untreated risk additional issues such as homelessness, or even suicide. Veterans don't like being labeled, no one likes being labeled. We believe Veterans are more labeled than civilians. Many Veterans refuse to seek treatment for that exact stigma.. Let's look at PTSD, the letter "D" stands for disorder. We feel the "D" should be dropped. Is not PTSD a normal reaction to an abnormal situation? We feel nothing about PTS makes it a disorder. Veterans who go to war and deal with post war situations is a normal reaction. Hypervigilance, nightmares, panic attacks, depression, anxiety, all NORMAL reactions.

What impact is the Campaign having in the community?

We believe the campaign is providing awareness to mental health and making people realize that seeking help for mental health is okay. We are all different, and all see the same thing in many different ways. No two people are alike. When comparing mental health now to years ago, you see a dramatic change in how mental health is dealt with both in the community and hospital settings. It is okay to ask for help, it is okay to be different. Changing the way others see a stigma means changing the stigma for those dealing with mental health. ■

ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition Founding Members: BryLin Behavioral Health System • Children's Mental Health Coalition of Western New York, Inc. • Community Partners of Western New York • Compeer Crisis Services of Erie County • Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office for People with Disabilities • Fellows Action Network • Fuerst Consulting Corporation • Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County • The Mental Health Advocates of WNY • Millennium Collaborative Care • Patrick P. Lee Foundation Preventionfocus, Inc. • Telesco Creative Group • The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation