

Medicare rebate support for psychologist's sessions

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Stress is inevitable and everyday problems such as work stress, relationship troubles and coping with illness can seriously affect the enjoyment of life. However, as discussed in the previous edition even though it is a negative experience at the time, stress can often have some positive outcomes such as building personal character and resilience and potentially changing ones perspective on life to reprioritize what is truly important.

The government has recognized that all of us need support in handling stress. Prolonged episodes of extreme stress can cause great emotional and mental suffering which may result in mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression.

Psychologists are professionally trained experts in human behaviour; the way people think, feel, act and interact. They are able to help people find ways of functioning better when dealing with stress and mental illness. Psychologists are trained to use a wide range of assessment and therapeutic strategies that can provide assistance with practical life coping strategies and can tailor many different types of psychological therapies to fit each individual's unique life circumstances.

Research shows that psychological treatments are very effective in managing many common mental health disorders. Some treatments are as successful and often can be more effective than medication in treating the most prevalent conditions such as depression and anxiety. It seems much more practical to learn ways of dealing with stressful situations than to just use medication alone to address the mental suffering. Research has shown that many people using a medication only approach have a greater chance of relapse after they stop taking it.

There is now financial assistance through the Medicare Benefits Schedule to subsidise the cost of seeing a psychologist.

In order to access this assistance your general practitioner, psychiatrist or paediatrician must initially make a determination that you need the services of a psychologist. Your practitioner must then provide you with a referral. In order to do so they will need to complete a detailed mental health assessment and prepare a mental health care plan as part of your referral. This process takes some time so be sure you book a longer appointment (approx 30 mins) to enable your practitioner to complete the paper work required.

Under the Medicare scheme you can only see a registered psychologist with a Medicare provider number. In accordance with the law all practicing psychologists are required to be registered. Not all counsellors or therapists are registered psychologists. An eligible patient may receive up to twelve individual sessions and up to twelve group sessions if appropriate in a calendar year. Your referring doctor will assess your progress after the first six sessions.

In order to find a psychologist that suits individual circumstances most doctors will usually be able to personally recommend a therapist that will be most appropriate. If you wish to see a specific psychologist you can discuss this with your doctor. Access the web site of The Australian Psychological Society, www.psychology.org.au to view each registered psychologist's area of special interest and locality.

The content of the psychologist's session with you will be dependant not only on the reason for the referral already made by your treating doctor, but also upon the psychologist's theoretical orientation (way of working). Your session with the psychologist may include discussion, testing, behavioral tasks, or other relevant activities. Patients will sometimes be asked to do assignments between visits and family may be involved in sessions.

Typically patients need only four to ten sessions with a psychologist, because of the effectiveness of short-term treatment. Occasionally a single session will be sufficient to provide appropriate and useful information. Some psychologists practice on a long-term basis and some patients require long-term support.

It is really encouraging that the government has recognized the great need for people to receive financial assistance to help them better manage mental stress and illness. If you believe that you or someone close to you could benefit from seeing a psychologist then encourage them to make an appointment to discuss these issues with a doctor. For more information regarding the new Medicare rebate please visit www.psychology.org.au



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