

Finding Mental Healthcare in the Durham/Orange Area

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call the Crisis Lifeline: 988

The 988 Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential mental health support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones in the United States.

Introduction

This is a list of resources and tips put together by the ERUUF Depression Peer Support Group based on their experiences and general understanding of mental healthcare. Unfortunately, we do not have lists of specific mental health providers to refer people to. We do not guarantee the quality of any providers. These suggestions are not meant to replace any advice given by a licensed professional mental healthcare provider.

Overview

It is sometimes challenging to find high quality mental healthcare. Mental healthcare is not a “system” in that care is not organized in a logical or coordinated way. Sometimes waitlists can be long.

But, please, **don't give up!** Help **is** out there, it may just take patience and tenacity to find it. This can be very hard when you are feeling bad, so if you have a friend or family member who might help get you through the maze, ask. They will probably pitch in to help dig through insurance plans, find openings, etc. If not, no worries. Just give yourself credit for each and every step you make.

Professionals Who Can Help

Types of Licensed Mental Health Professionals (aka Providers):

There are lots of degrees and confusing terms out there. Some providers provide therapy only, others can prescribe medication as well as therapy.

Here is our simple, quick take in terms of who you might want to look for first. We have simplified these because it can be overwhelming. (There are lots of arguments between these professionals about who to see when. We won't get into those professional debates.).

Strong suggestion: Always look for a **licensed provider**

Psychiatrists (MD): If you feel your symptoms are relatively severe, try to see a psychiatrist. They are MD's. They can prescribe medications, if you need them. Select one that is Board Certified.

Psychologists (PhD or PsyD): If you think your symptoms are relatively complex, see if you can find a psychologist. They usually have the most amount of training in assessment and diagnosis.

Clinicians and Therapists: (Make sure these have an “L” and an “M” in their credentials. This means they are licensed and have a master’s degree.) If you are not sure who to see, start with any of these. They can provide a general assessment of the nature and severity of your condition. Even if they do not treat the condition, they will try to refer you to someone who does.

Psychiatric Physician Assistants: “PA-C”, and “CAQ - Psychiatry

Psychiatric Physician Assistants can offer assessments, diagnose conditions and do some amount of therapy for mental health conditions or substance use disorders. They are also qualified to prescribe and monitor medications. Look for someone who is a “PA-C” and “CAQ” - Psychiatry

Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners (“PNP”)

Psychiatric or mental health nurse practitioners can provide assessment, diagnosis and therapy for mental health conditions or substance use disorders. They are also qualified to prescribe and monitor medications.

Tip: When looking for any provider, try to find one with at least five years of experience.

Step-by-Step: How to Find Help

Options are usually based on your health insurance (unless you want to pay out of pocket). Today, almost all health insurance policies are required by law to offer some mental health benefits.

If you have in-network only insurance:

Go to insurance company’s website for your plan and find the list of in-network approved providers
Look up the provider’s listing on [Psychology Today](#) website

Note: Some are listed as taking new patients, but actually aren’t. Frustrating, but don’t be discouraged.

Make a list of potential providers

Go to the provider’s own website and see if you are still interested

Make an appointment

If you have an insurance plan that has an out-of-network option:

Do the same as above but it is usually cheaper to still go in-network.

If you don’t see anyone you like, go to [Psychology Today’s](#) website of providers.

Note: Before looking, check to be sure exactly how your out-of-network process works

If you have a Medicare Advantage Plan:

Do the same as above for regular network insurance but from your Advantage website

If you have traditional Medicare:

Medicare typically covers most mental health outpatient services at a 20% copay. Providers must be Medicare approved.

See the list of Medicare approved mental health providers on [medicare.gov](#)

Or, call Medicare (live help 24x7), at 1-800-633-4227

If you have no health insurance: go to [healthcare.gov](#)

Go to healthcare.gov to see if you can qualify for insurance. Plans are required to offer mental health coverage. NC recently changed some health insurance laws, so check it out. Rates are based on income, so don’t assume you can’t afford it.

If you are eligible for a healthcare.gov plan, great! Then:
Go through all of the steps in the healthcare.gov online application

Not yet eligible for the healthcare.gov options?
Put it on your calendar **now** for when you **can** register later!

If you do not now qualify for any health insurance plan, and cannot afford to pay the full cost (or sliding scale cost) of care:

North Carolina offers some low-cost or no-cost public mental health services. The organization that serves Durham and Orange Counties is [Alliance Health](#). It is best to call them to determine your options: 800-510-9132 (M-S, 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.)

If you can pay the full cost of care, completely out of pocket:

Ask friends and family for recommendations.
Look at the [Psychology Today](#) options.

Tips:

- Always consider virtual appointments, as there are more providers around the state who can provide care.

Where to Find Help:

Large Mental Healthcare Organizations Available in this Area:

Universities:

Duke: [Duke Mental Health and Behavioral Health](#)

UNC: [UNC Adult Outpatient Psyc Adult Outpatient Services Depart of Psychiatry](#)

Both known for research in newest treatments for mental health care
Tend to have students in training, but supervised very closely by top experts
Best chance of getting an appointment is to ask for a referral from another doctor in the Duke system (ie your PCP, internist, or any other doctor) or UNC system
Websites often show that the provider has availability, but actually does not.

Note: We recommend at least trying to get services at either of these universities (including the clinics below.) They have quality controls, mostly use evidence-based treatment approaches and accept most insurance policies.

Assessment and therapy options within the above universities.:

[Duke Psychology Clinic](#)

Grad students pursuing PhD degrees in clinical psychology; all are under supervision of board certified clinical psychologists

[UNC Assessment Clinic](#)

Work is done by PhD candidates in clinical psychology, but always under the supervision of a board certified psychologist. They diagnose any psychological condition and route you to the appropriate providers. Note: it is not just for UNC students, but anyone in the public at all levels of income.

Large Practices:

[Mindpath Health](#)

One of the largest mental healthcare organizations in NC
Takes most mental healthcare insurance (not Medicaid)
Has same-day online mental health care therapy and psychiatry services available for urgent care for new and current patients in NC
More likely to have openings than those in individual private practice
Can more easily make referrals within the organization, once a patient has met with any provider in the organization

NC Funded Programs:

[Alliance Health](#)

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Smaller Practices, Individual Providers

There are many (in fact most) providers who have their own independent practices. We have found the best (but still not great) way to find an individual provider is the listings on [Psychology Today](#). The listings include psychologists, but also psychiatrists, social work therapists, etc.

Again, be sure they are licensed providers.

Other Potential Alternatives:

Employee Assistance Programs:

Some employers offer an employee assistance program. Check with your employer's benefits website. These benefits vary widely by organization, but usually offer a number of free sessions per year to help with problems, including mental health. Usually, they can do a referral to a mental health provider if you need more significant help. Their services are almost always confidential. For example, Duke has one for employees of the university and medical system called the [Personal Assistance Service](#).

BetterHelp:

This is a somewhat different model for therapy. You pay for a subscription which gives you access to therapists who you can communicate with via video conferences, text messaging, chatting, etc. It is completely online. All therapists are licensed. None of their providers take insurance and the fees are usually \$70 to \$100 per week.

Online Therapy (AI-type) Apps

There are many of these. In reviewing the online literature, it appears that most are [not validated by quality research](#) to be proven effective. Privacy can also be an issue. However, It is exciting and the science is growing, so there is potential for these to be very effective. In our opinion, these are probably not the best way to go at this time.

Need help soon and overwhelmed?

If you, or someone you know is in crisis, call the [988 Crisis Line](#).

Otherwise...

Get an appointment to see **any available licenced** mental healthcare provider

Schedule an appointment somewhere, virtual, whatever, even if you don't particularly think they are a good match for you.

At the appointment, discuss your symptoms, issues, problems and what you would like from treatment

Describe the seriousness of your condition (mild to severe)

If that provider offers an approach you absolutely do not want (not personality, but approach), ask for a referral

Generally, but not always, a provider will help you find another mental health provider that matches your preferences/needs. But you are under no obligation to continue with any provider, for any reason.

Remember: You are not alone. Please don't ever give up.

Care for People in Historically Marginalized Groups:

Everyone should get help based on who they feel comfortable working with. People in historically marginalized groups (LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, women, people of limited economic means, etc.) may have a harder time finding a provider who "gets" them.

The [Psychology Today](#) list does allow you to sort based on some of these factors, but may not have all the criteria you may want. If you can find any licensed provider who at least seems like a good human being, tell them that you really want a provider who is X or provides Y. Ask them to refer you to someone who does meet your criteria. Most providers have their own knowledge of other therapists and will be very willing to help you find someone.

Note: If you are Latino, you may want to talk to El Futuro in Durham, even if you have no insurance. They are nice, offer therapy in Spanish, and do not check for documentation status. Phone: [919 688-7101](#)

Please don't give up trying to find someone who can help.

What to Expect at Your First Phone Call and/or Appointment:

Finding a provider is a milestone in getting better! Congratulations in making it through the steps to get this far.

What to do next...

It is important to find a provider you feel comfortable with whom you feel emotionally safe. However, at the initial phone call/appointment, your provider might feel a bit reserved. They are often trained to be that way in order to get an idea of your general situation/condition from a neutral perspective. They won't necessarily feel like a "new good friend".

You might be asked something like, "What brings you in here today?". Describe how you are feeling emotionally, and your stressors, but also provide information about how it is affecting your work and your family, your sleep, your eating, your energy level, your ability to concentrate. Include any family history of any mental health conditions. Tell them what makes you feel worse, and what makes you feel better.

Note: Also, don't worry about saying the "wrong" thing or an embarrassing thing. Or, drawing a blank. Anything is 100% fine to share. For some people, writing these things down beforehand is helpful.

At the end of the appointment, ask the provider to give you a general assessment of your condition/situation. Ask if they treat that condition and how they would do the treatment. If you are not comfortable with their suggested treatment, ask them for a referral to another provider that might better suit your needs.

Note: Don't worry about hurting the provider's feelings by not going again. It happens all the time. They know that not every mental healthcare professional is a good match for you. If you feel more comfortable, you can ask them for a referral via email after your appointment is over.

For Additional Help: [NAMI](#)

NAMI provides advocacy, education, support and public awareness related to mental help. They have people who can help you find resources and they also have support groups. We have heard these are good. In the past, NAMI's primary focus was for people with significant mental health conditions like schizophrenia, clinical depression and bipolar disorder. However, they have branched out to less severe forms of mental illness.

For general help:

[NAMI Orange](#)

[NAMI Durham](#)

Support groups:

NAMI NC has lists of [support groups across the state](#) for people with mental illness and their families/loved ones. Here is a list of local groups:

[NAMI Durham Support Groups](#)

[NAMI Orange Support Groups](#)

There are also NAMI [national online support groups](#).

What You Can Do to Help Yourself:

Hang in there! It is hard, but give yourself credit for taking even small steps.

There is high quality research showing that the following may help.

- Exercise (even brisk walking)
- Keeping a regular routine (wake time, mealtimes, work schedules, exercise schedules, going to bed time, medication times)
- Meditation

- Doing social activities (one on one, or with a group you like)
- Eating healthy

We are not 100% sure about the research on the following (just our lack of knowledge), but they have been known to help:

- Assisting someone else who needs help with something (from doing volunteer work, to simply helping a senior citizen who can't set their tv or bringing over food to someone who is feeling sick. It doesn't have to be formal or complicated.)
- Active, absorbing activities (ones that require you to focus on them)
- Limiting screen-time and smartphone use, especially at night
- Listening to upbeat or calming music (depending on your mood)
- Writing down what you are grateful for
- Spending time in the outdoors
- Creating art

Create your own list of what helps/doesn't help. Individual results may vary in terms of what works and doesn't work. It can be challenging to do the above, but keep trying.

Updating this Guide:

This is not a comprehensive guide on getting mental healthcare in Durham and Orange counties. In fact, given that there is no coordinated system for mental healthcare, that may be impossible for anyone to pull together. We thought we would at least give you a place to start. We are going to try to continue to update this guide as we have time and learn more.