

Overcoming Appointment Anxiety

Chapman Learning Commons



Introduction

The very first time I accessed mental health resources was in my first year at UBC, and to say I was nervous would be an understatement. Everything was new and unfamiliar to begin with, and with the amount of resources available to me, I had no idea how to navigate it all. It became so overwhelming, I ended up avoiding it altogether for 2 years. Now, I'm facing it all over again, but this time I've come prepared with a few new strategies.

Anxiety or nerves before any type of appointment is completely normal; there's no concrete way of telling how everything will go, and that uncertainty can be debilitating.

It's what can prevent us from getting the help we need, even if deep down, we know that we need it. I hope that, with this video your first few steps will feel a little more certain, so that you too can start your journey.

Concern 1: The process seems overwhelming and I don't know what to expect

The process of making an appointment can feel almost paralyzing - everything feels so uncertain, and the unknown usually makes anxious thoughts worse. At one point, I tried doing some more research to see what resource might be best for me, and while it helped to an extent, it quickly became overwhelming.

How do I know which option to take? Where do I even start? There often isn't a definitive process or starting point, and I find that even once it's found, I tend to have second thoughts.

Eventually, I decided to contact a wellness advisor to help guide my first steps. They only had same-day appointments, so there wasn't a date looming over my head over the course of a few days or weeks. Additionally, after being given the space to talk about my concerns, I was walked through a health plan and was referred to any related resources.

Of course, I was still scared going into this as well. It still technically was an appointment, and I ended up thinking of every possible thing that could occur during that short timespan. But, it really felt like a lot of the research and planning was already done for me, which helped lift a lot of that uncertainty. For you, that first point of contact could be an academic advisor, a professor... anyone or anything that fits your needs! Of course, that doesn't mean it'll go exactly as expected, but taking that step can help with the process, and is a good start as any.

Concern 2: What if it doesn't go the way I want it to?

One of the biggest things that held me back from making appointments was fear that everyone would think I was lying, or that I was even lying to myself. Despite the fact that I would often keep my symptoms private, I'd somehow convince myself that I was faking it.

“What if I’m just doing this for attention?”

“What if I don’t actually need this?”

And when I didn’t have these thoughts, I would think: “What if I do need this, but no one believes me?”

A positive experience isn't guaranteed—sometimes, the answers we get aren't the ones we want to hear, and that can be disheartening. But, trying could also mean getting the answers we need rather than continuing to navigate in the dark. I for one was seeking help for social anxiety, and while I did eventually get that diagnosis, I was also opened up to a lot of other possibilities that still would have benefited from treatment.

For example, while I could have had anxiety or a mood disorder, I also could have had underlying health problems that I wouldn't have found out about if I hadn't reached out. But, those thoughts alone are reason enough to seek help. Once I got my diagnosis I discovered, “Oh, I do need this.” And while I still had some of those doubts, it became much easier to reframe them into a broader perspective. What's more, while the system has its own challenges, it is also filled with plenty of kind, open, and supportive people to help you along your journey.

Just as some things may go worse than expected, other things may go better.

Concern 3: I don't know how to prepare or what to bring

Part of the fear or anxiety can come from anticipation; at this point, the appointment might be scheduled, but now that date is looming and a million possible things could pop into your head. For me, those things mostly had to do with whether I was prepared:

Is this the right time for me?

What if I forget to bring something?

What if I forget what to say?

Talking with people like professors, advisors, and doctors stresses me out to an extreme. No matter how much I script my words, I often panic and forget half the things I want to say. This can be frustrating, as I don't get to address some important concerns, and ultimately don't get the help I want.

Something that tends to help, though, is bringing a list. Writing one in general helps me prepare ahead of time to settle some of my worries about bringing things I might need, but it

can also act as an anchor during conversations. During all of my appointments, I had a list of relevant symptoms - anything I thought could be related to my concern, or might be worth pointing out—along with explanations and examples. This not only served as a reminder, but also helped keep me on track. Anytime I panicked, I just went back to the list.

At first, I felt a bit awkward bringing it out or even mentioning it, but ultimately that list was meant to not only help me, but the doctor as well so that they could figure out what might be going on. To put it simply, that list can help them to help you, which is ultimately why they are there.

Another big contributor was my friends. They were the ones to first suggest bringing a list, and helped a lot in the process as they shared their own experiences. Because of it, I felt more certain while accessing resources. While every person's experience is unique, it felt comforting to know they at least went through a similar process.

It can also help to be accompanied by a friend, or someone else you trust. So long as both parties are comfortable with it, and the appointment isn't confidential, they can act as another anchor or emotional support. Even just having their presence can help build more confidence. It could also feel better going alone—and that's okay too! At the end of the day, you know your comfort best, and the decision is yours

Conclusion:

Whether for a physical check-up, financial assistance, or mental health, appointments can be daunting. The overwhelm, the uncertainty, the waiting... all of it can turn into fear and bar us from accessing important resources. Appointments are still something that intimidate me, and that's likely something I'll have to continue dealing with. But a step is a step, no matter how small, and no matter how far.