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INFORMATION FOR CLIENTS

Welcome to my practice. I appreciate your giving me the opportunity to be of help to you. This handout answers questions that clients often ask about therapy. I believe our work will be most helpful to you when you have a clear idea of what we are trying to do.

This handout talks about the following:

- my approach to therapy
- the risks and benefits of therapy
- the goals of therapy
- How long therapy might take
- the cost of my services and how I handle money matters
- other important areas of our relationship

About Psychotherapy

I strongly believe you should feel comfortable with the therapist you choose, and hopeful about the therapy. When you feel this way, therapy is more likely to be very helpful to you. Let me describe my approach to therapy. I have extensive experience in a wide variety of areas including depression, anxiety, relationship issues, life transitions, sexual abuse and trauma recovery. I use a variety of techniques depending on the circumstances as well as on you, the individual. I work with you to identify healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms and assist you in changing those that are maladaptive. I help you to make needed shifts in thoughts or behaviors when struggling with factors in your life, such as relationships, environment, or job stress. I recognize and incorporate spirituality into psychotherapy when appropriate, as the two may be interwoven. Often fully living in the present can be facilitated by working through and gaining insight into past issues, as well as preparing and planning for the future.

By the end of our first or second session, I will tell you how I see your situation and how I think we should proceed. I view therapy as a partnership between us. You define the problem areas to be worked on; I use my training and experience to help you make the changes you want to make. Psychotherapy is not like visiting a medical doctor. It requires your very active involvement. It requires your best efforts to change thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. For example, I want you to tell me about important experiences, what they mean to you, and what strong feelings are involved. This is one of the ways you are an active partner in therapy.

An important part of your therapy will be practicing new skills that you will learn in our sessions. At times and when appropriate I will ask you to practice outside our meetings, and we will work together to set up homework assignments for you. I might ask you to do exercises, keep records, and read to deepen your learning. You will probably have to work on relationships in your life and make long-term efforts to get the best results. These are important parts of personal change. Change will sometimes be easy and quick, but it also might be slow and frustrating, and you will need to keep trying. There are no instant, painless cures and no “magic pills.” However, you can learn new ways of looking at your problems that will be very helpful for changing your feelings and reactions.

Most of my clients see me once a week for 3 to 4 months. After that, we meet less often for several more months. Therapy then usually comes to an end. The process of ending therapy, called “termination,” can be a very valuable part of our work. Stopping therapy should not be done casually, although either of us may decide to end it if we believe it is in your best interest. If you wish to stop therapy at any time, I ask that you agree now to meet then for at least one more session to review our work together. We will review our goals, the work we have done, any future work that needs to be done, and our choices. If you would like to take a “time out” from therapy to try it on your own, we should discuss this. We can often make such a “time out” be more helpful.

The Benefits and Risks of Therapy

As with any powerful treatment, there are some risks as well as many benefits with therapy. You should think about both the benefits and risks when making any treatment decisions. For example, in therapy, there is a risk that clients will, for a time, have uncomfortable levels of sadness, guilt, anxiety, anger, frustration, loneliness, helplessness, or other negative feelings. Clients may recall unpleasant memories. These feelings or memories may bother a client at work or in school. Another risk relates to stigma attached to therapy; some people in the community may mistakenly view anyone in therapy as weak, or perhaps as seriously disturbed. Also, clients in therapy may have problems with people important to them. Family secrets may be told. Most of these risks are to be expected when people are making important changes in their lives.

While you consider these risks, you should know also that the benefits of therapy have been shown by scientists in hundreds of well-designed research studies. People who are depressed may find their mood lifting. Others may no longer feel afraid, angry, or anxious. In therapy, people have a chance to talk things out fully until their feelings are relieved or the problems are solved. Clients' relationships and coping skills may improve greatly. They may get more satisfaction out of social and family relationships. Their personal goals and values may become clearer. They may grow in many directions—as people, in their close relationships, in their work or schooling, and in the ability to enjoy their lives. I do not take on clients I do not think I can help. Therefore, I will enter our relationship with optimism about our progress.

Consultations

If you could benefit from a treatment I cannot provide, I will help you to get it. You have a right to ask me about such other treatments, their risks, and their benefits. Based on what I learn about your problems, I may recommend a medical exam or use of medication. If I do this, I will fully discuss my reasons with you, so that you can decide what is best. If you are treated by another professional, I will coordinate my services with them and with your own medical doctor. I will always obtain your written consent prior to speaking with another professional about you.

If for some reason treatment is not going well, I might suggest you see another therapist or another professional for an evaluation. As a responsible person and ethical therapist, I cannot continue to treat you if my treatment is not working for you. If you wish for another professional's opinion at any time, or wish to talk with another therapist, I will help you find a qualified person and will provide him or her with the information needed.

What to Expect from Our Relationship

As a professional, I will use my best knowledge and skills to help you. This includes following the standards of the American Psychological Association, or APA. In your best interests, the APA puts limits on the relationship between a therapist and a client, and I will abide by these. Let me explain these limits, so you will not think they are personal responses to you.

First, I am licensed and trained to practice psychology—not law, medicine, finance, or any other profession. I am not able to give you good advice from these other professional viewpoints.

Second, state laws and the rules of the APA require me to keep what you tell me confidential (that is, just between us). You can trust me not to tell anyone else what you tell me, except in certain limited situations. I explain what those are in the "About Confidentiality" section of this handout. Here I want to explain that I try not to reveal who my clients are.

This is part of my effort to maintain your privacy. If we meet on the street or socially, I may not initiate contact or talk to you very much. My behavior will not be a personal reaction to you, but a way to maintain the confidentiality of our relationship.

Third, in your best interest, and following the APA's standards, I can only be your therapist. I cannot have any other role in your life. I cannot, now or ever, be a close friend to or socialize with any of my clients. I cannot be a therapist to someone who is already a friend. I can never have a sexual or romantic relationship with any client during, or after, the course of therapy. I cannot have a business relationship with any of my clients, other than the therapy relationship.

If you ever become involved in a divorce or custody dispute, I want you to understand and agree that I will not provide evaluations or expert testimony in court. You should hire a different mental health professional for any evaluations or testimony you require. This position is based on two reasons: (1) My statements will be seen as biased in your favor because we have a therapy relationship; and (2) the testimony might affect our therapy relationship, and I must put this relationship first.

About Confidentiality

I will treat with great care all the information you share with me. It is your legal right that our sessions and my records about you will be kept private. That is why I ask you to sign a “release-of-records” form before I can talk about you or send my records about you to anyone else. In general, I will tell no one what you tell me. I will not even reveal that you are receiving treatment from me. In all but a few rare situations, your confidentiality (that is, our privacy) is protected by federal and state laws and by the rules of my profession. Here are the most common cases in which confidentiality is not protected:

1. If you were sent to me by a court or an employer for evaluation or treatment, the court or employer expects a report from me. If this is your situation, please talk with me before you tell me anything you do not want the court or your employer to know. You have a right to tell me only what you are comfortable with telling.
2. If you are suing someone, being sued, or being charged with a crime, and you tell the court that you are seeing me. This could lead to a judge ordering me to show the court my records. Please consult your lawyer about these issues.
3. If you make a serious threat to harm yourself or another person, the law requires me to try to protect you or that other person. This usually means telling others about the threat. I cannot promise never to tell others about threats you make.
4. If I believe a child or elder has been abused or neglected, I am legally required to report this to the authorities.

There are two situations in which I might talk about part of your case with another therapist. I ask now for your understanding and agreement to let me do so in these two situations.

First, when I am away from the office for several days, I have a trusted fellow therapist “cover” for me. If it seems that you would benefit from this coverage, I will need to speak with this therapist about you. I will obtain your consent prior to doing so. This therapist will be available to you in emergencies. Of course, this therapist is bound by the same laws and rules as I am to protect your confidentiality.

Second, I occasionally consult other therapists or other professionals about my clients. This helps me in giving high-quality treatment. These persons are also required to keep your information private. Your name will never be given to them, some information will be changed or omitted, and they will be told only as much as they need to know to understand your situation.

Except for situations like those I have described above, I will always maintain your privacy. I also ask you not to disclose the name or identity of any other client being seen in this office. You may see another client in the waiting room. If this is a concern of yours please speak with me about it and we will make arrangements so that this does not occur. I make every effort to keep the names and records of clients private.

If your records need to be seen by another professional, or anyone else, I will discuss it with you. If you agree to share these records, you will need to sign an authorization form. This form states exactly what information is to be shared, with whom, and why, and it also sets time limits. You may read this form at any time. If you have questions, please ask me.

It is my office policy to destroy clients’ records 15 years after the end of our therapy. Until then, I will keep your case records in a safe place.

If I must discontinue our relationship because of illness, disability, or other presently unforeseen circumstances, I ask you to agree to my transferring your records to another therapist who will assure their confidentiality, preservation, and appropriate access.

As part of cost control efforts, an insurance company will sometimes ask for more information on symptoms, diagnoses, and my treatment methods. It will become part of your permanent medical record. I will let you know if this should occur and what the company has asked for. Please understand that I have no control over how these records are handled at the insurance company. My policy is to provide only as much information as the insurance company will need to pay your benefits.

You have the right to ask that certain information not be shared with family members or others who might join a session, and I can agree to that limitation. You can also tell me if you want me to send mail or phone you at a more private address or number than, say, your home or cellphone. If this is of concern to you, please tell me so that we can make arrangements.

My Background

I am a psychologist and have been providing therapy through the private practice setting since 1997. I am trained and experienced in providing therapy with children, adolescents, and adults. Earlier in my career I worked with all ages. Currently, I have narrowed my practice to specialize in working with adults. I have worked in clinics, hospitals, hospice, residential programs, and similar settings. I hold these qualifications:

- I have a doctoral degree in clinical psychology from the University of Florida, whose program is approved by the American Psychological Association (APA).
- I completed an internship in clinical psychology, approved by the APA.
- I am licensed as a psychologist in Florida.
- I am a member of the APA.
- I am a member of the Florida Psychological Association (FPA).

About Our Appointments

The very first time I meet with you, we will need to give each other much basic information. Following this, we will usually meet for a 45 to 50 minute session once a week. It is best to schedule a regular day and time to meet weekly, but I will work with you and your schedule to the best of my ability. I will tell you at least a month in advance of my vacations or any other times we cannot meet. Please ask about my schedule in making your own plans.

An appointment is a commitment to our work. We agree to meet here and to be on time. If I am ever unable to start on time, I ask your understanding; this would be a rare occurrence and only in an urgent situation. I also assure you that you will receive the full time scheduled. If you are late, we will be unable to meet for the full time, because it is likely that I will have another appointment after yours.

Please try not to miss sessions if you can possibly help it. When you must cancel, please notify me at least 24 hours in advance. If you start to cancel or miss sessions regularly, we will need to discuss the situation and come up with an alternative arrangement. I will reserve a regular appointment time for you into the foreseeable future. I also do this for my other patients. Therefore, I am rarely able to fill a cancelled session unless I have several days' notice. You will be charged the full fee for sessions cancelled with less than 24 hours' notice, for reasons other than emergencies.

Fees, Payments, and Billing

Payment for services is an important part of any professional relationship. This is even truer in therapy; one treatment goal is to make relationships and the duties and obligations they involve clear. You are responsible for seeing that my services are paid for. Meeting this responsibility shows your commitment and maturity.

My current regular fees are as follows. You will be given advance notice if my fees should change. The initial evaluation is \$200 for approximately 50 to 60 minutes. Regular therapy services are \$165 for a 45 to 50 minute session. I do reserve a limited number of sliding scale slots based on individuals' financial circumstances. Please pay for each session (or make copayment with certain insurance companies) at session's end. I have found that this arrangement helps us stay focused on our goals, and so it works best. It also allows me to keep my fees as low as possible, because it cuts down on my bookkeeping costs. I suggest you make out your check before each session begins, so that our time will be used best. Other payment or fee arrangements must be worked out before the end of our first meeting. If you need documentation of treatment for insurance or other purposes, please let me know and I will provide this to you. This can be done in the form of a statement at the end of each month, or a statement documenting each session. The statement will show all of our meetings, the charges for each, how much has been paid, and how much (if any) is still owed. If detailed statements are not necessary, I will provide you with a standard receipt upon payment.

Telephone consultations: I believe that telephone consultations may be suitable or even needed at times in our therapy. If so, I will charge you our regular fee, prorated over the time needed.

Reports and letters: I will not charge you for my time spent making routine reports to your insurance company. However, I will have to bill you for any extra-long or complex reports the company might require. The company will not cover this fee. Similarly, I will not charge for a short note documenting treatment is occurring. However, I will bill for any lengthy or complex letters needed.

I realize that my fees involve a substantial amount of money, although they are well in line with similar professionals' charges. For you to get the best value for your money, we must work hard and well. Depending on your financial circumstances and total medical costs for any year, psychotherapy may be a deductible

expense; consult your tax advisor. Cost of transportation to and from appointments and fees paid may be deductible from the client's personal income taxes as medical expenses.

If you think you may have trouble paying your bills on time, please discuss this with me. I will also raise the matter with you so we can arrive at a solution. If your unpaid balance reaches \$ 450.00, I will notify you by mail. If it then remains unpaid, I must stop therapy with you. Patients who fail to make payment arrangements may be referred to a collection agency.

If You Have Health Insurance Coverage

Because I am a licensed psychologist, many health insurance plans will help you pay for therapy and other services I offer. Because health insurance is written by many different companies, I cannot tell you what your plan covers. Please read your plan's booklet under coverage for "Outpatient Psychotherapy" or under "Treatment of Mental and Nervous Conditions." Or call your insurance company or employer's benefits office to find out what you need to know.

If your health insurance will pay part of my fee, I will help you with your insurance claim forms and provide any necessary documentation. However, please keep two things in mind:

1. Insurance companies vary in their coverage. You are responsible for checking your insurance coverage, deductibles, payment rates, copayments, and so forth. Your insurance contract is between you and your company; it is not between me and the insurance company.
2. You (not your insurance company or any other person or company) are responsible for paying the fees we agree upon. If you ask me to bill a relative or an insurance company, and I do not receive payment, I will then expect this payment from you.

I will provide information about you to your insurance company only with your informed and written consent. Health insurance is a contract between you (or your employer) and your insurer; I am not part of that contract unless I am on the insurance panel (i.e., Tricare). However, I will supply you with an invoice for my services with the standard diagnostic and procedure codes for billing purposes, the times we met, my charges, and your payments. You can use this to apply for reimbursement. If your insurance company is Tricare I will submit all appropriate billing for you; you may be responsible for a co-pay depending on your plan.

If You Need to Contact Me

I cannot promise that I will be available at all times. Although I am in the office Monday through Friday, from approximately 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., I do not take phone calls when I am with a client. You can always leave a message on my answering machine, and I will return your call as soon as I can. I return all calls by the end of the next business day.

If you have a behavioral or emotional crisis and cannot wait for me to return your call, you or your family member/friend should call one of the following emergency agencies: the local crisis center at (904)632-0600 or 911.

Safety

If I become concerned about your personal safety or the safety of another person that you feel you might harm, I am required by law and by the rules of my profession to make sure you and/or that other person are safe. This could mean that you would be admitted to a mental health facility if you were a danger to yourself or someone else.

Statement of Principles and Complaint Procedures

It is my intention to fully abide by all the rules of the American Psychological Association (APA) and by those of my state license. In my practice as a therapist, I do not discriminate against clients because of any of these factors: age, sex, marital/family status, race, color, religious beliefs, ethnic origin, place of residence, veteran status, physical disability, health status, sexual orientation, or criminal record unrelated to present dangerousness. This is a personal commitment, as well as being required by federal, state, and local laws and regulations. I will always take steps to advance and support the values of equal opportunity, human dignity, and racial/ethnic/ cultural diversity. If you believe you have been discriminated against, please bring this matter to my attention immediately.