

Lesson 4 - Overcoming barriers to accessing professional mental health care

Finding the right mental health support can be challenging when you live with arthritis. By learning practical strategies to overcome common barriers, you can take meaningful steps to get the support and care you need to effectively manage your mental health.

In this lesson, we will address some of the challenges that people with arthritis may face when seeking timely professional mental health care. You will learn about strategies to overcome these barriers and advocate for the care you need.



Key points

1. It's not always easy to get the mental health care you need – there are a lot of hurdles.
2. A family doctor or rheumatologist can identify when professional help may be needed and direct you to trusted sources of mental health care.
3. Virtual care has been shown to be as effective as in-person care and may be particularly beneficial if you have mobility challenges or live in remote areas.
4. Gaining support from community resources, friends and family or peer groups can also help improve mental well-being.



Common hurdles to accessing timely professional care

There are several predictable barriers that people with arthritis may encounter when seeking care for their mental health. Some of these include not knowing where to go, the potential cost of services, finding time to meet, and stigma.¹ These barriers often delay access to care.

Many people don't know where to go to look for mental health care. Unfortunately, service gaps for mental health care continue to exist in Canada and the United States of America. Family doctors and the staff in family practice centers, including nurse practitioners, can be a first point of contact. They can assess mental health concerns, prescribe medications (when needed), and can refer people to community programs in the area as well as mental health specialists.

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The cost of mental health services, including therapy or medication can also be a significant barrier. However, it is important to consider the range of low- to no-cost options that may be available such as employee assistance programs, student services (for university students), supplemental health insurance programs, and government or community-based programs. For example, stress and mood management courses are often available at local community centers.

The Canadian Community Mental Health Network (ccmhn.ca) maintains lists of local services in your area. A full list of services available in each province is available [here](#). In larger cities, there are often low-cost clinics that offer treatment at universities that offer graduate training programs in counseling and clinical psychology, social work, and occupational therapy.

Stigma surrounding mental health can be another significant barrier. People with arthritis may face discomfort when asking about mental health care. It is crucial to challenge and address the stigma associated with mental health by promoting open dialogue, education, and understanding within the arthritis community.



Navigating the healthcare system

Navigating the healthcare system effectively is essential for accessing timely professional care and understanding the referral processes for mental health services. Knowing the steps to access mental health services within your healthcare system can help streamline the process and reduce delay.^{2,3} Access to mental health care is ever evolving, so be sure to check that any information you are getting is accurate and up to date.

Being able to talk to your family doctor (or rheumatologist) may be a good way to learn about potential options for mental health counseling. Be prepared to share the preferences and concerns you have about your counselling services. Before your appointment, write down what is troubling you and how this is affecting your everyday life. For example, your list may include symptoms like feelings of sadness that you cannot shake, inability to concentrate at work or even get to work, having a feeling of tightness and pressure in your chest most of the day, or feeling exhausted and unmotivated to do things you usually enjoy. Writing these things down will help you explain more clearly what you are feeling and how it is affecting your ability to function. The CAMH offers practical guidance about how to prepare for meeting with a mental health counselor for the first time [here](#).



Accessing community resources and support

Community resources, helplines, and non-profit organizations also offer valuable assistance in accessing mental health care services for many. A first step is to identify and learn about resources from local community centers, non-profit organizations, and mental health helplines that can guide you towards appropriate care options.^{2,3}

Most group-based mental health programs offer reduced fees based on income. Understanding the eligibility criteria and application processes for these programs can help you access the care you need without facing excessive financial burden. Some community health organizations and interfaith councils maintain directories of clergy who have received mental health training or collaborate with mental health professionals.



Accessing virtual mental health care

In recent years, virtual care has become a common way to access mental health care. Virtual mental health care is convenient and allows individuals to work directly with qualified mental health providers in the comfort and privacy of their homes (or other settings when privacy can be assured). This is often valued for people with arthritis who may face mobility challenges, live in remote areas, or are experiencing disease flares.

Through extensive work from Arthritis Consumer Experts and others in the community, we are learning who benefits most from virtual mental health and when it may not be a good fit. For instance, a 2021 Arthritis Consumer Experts' national survey^{4,5} found that people living with arthritis who identified as Black, Indigenous and people of colour were:

symptoms can help individuals take proactive steps towards seeking appropriate support and care.

- more likely to experience factors that made it difficult to use virtual care;
- more likely to not have access to virtual care services; and,
- less likely to be very satisfied with their virtual care experiences.

Many new technologies are available to help ensure remote care can be offered safely and effectively. Specialized virtual mental health solutions provide secure options for receiving care and are increasingly available through employers, community centres, federal and provincial health systems, and other local resources.

However, easier access to mental health care has also introduced new concerns. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, shortages in qualified mental health professionals

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have grown significantly in Canada. Virtual care made it easier for people without proper training to offer “health coaching” services. It is important to realize that the term “therapist” is not protected by law – anyone can call themselves a therapist.

There are several things you can do to ensure that any mental health provider you may choose to work with – virtually or in person – is appropriately trained and qualified. Qualified mental health professionals must be licensed by a regulatory board and remain “in good standing” in their province or state to practice independently. Look for credentials such as PhD or PsyD for psychologists, MSW for social workers or MA/MEd for counseling psychologists. Increasingly, individuals who are in training are becoming licensed, and are called “qualifying psychologists” or “licensed interns.” However, not all insurance will cover services provided by such trainees, so it is best to check first if you will be seeking reimbursement.

Individuals with deep clinical experience and assessment skills will have a terminal degree such as PhD, PsyD or DSW. Psychiatrists are medical doctors who have completed subspecialty training in psychiatry. However, given the worldwide workforce shortages, and trends over time for psychiatrists to work with more severe and complex mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe depression), wait times to see a psychiatrist are often long. In Canada, generally to see a psychiatrist, you must be referred by a family doctor.

Many mental health professionals are well equipped to support individuals living with arthritis. **Licensed Psychologists** (PhD, PsyD with subspecialties in clinical, counseling, or health) can help people with arthritis by providing tools to manage stress, cope with chronic pain, and address emotional challenges like depression and anxiety, improving both mental well-being and overall quality of life. Social workers (MSWs) can help people with arthritis by offering emotional support, connecting them to community resources, and guiding them through practical and psychological challenges that affect their mental health and daily life. They are well positioned to help with crisis interventions and address social determinants of health such as housing, income and disability services.

Licensed counselors and psychotherapists (MA/Med) can provide guidance, education, and support; often, they may be in training for PhD/PsyD or work under the supervision of these individuals. You can verify that the license of any qualified mental health professional is active and unrestricted (i.e., no disciplinary actions or complaints pending) by checking the public online registers or calling the local licensing board.

Although **members of the clergy** are not typically licensed mental health professionals, there is a growing movement for some to receive additional specialized training to offer supportive counseling, particularly in areas related to grief, stress, and spiritual well-being.

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They can be valuable sources of emotional and spiritual support and often can help connect individuals with professionals who are trained and qualified to provide mental health services.

Another option is to use trusted directories such as **Psychology Today** (Canadian), the **Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA)**, **Canadian Professional Counsellors Association (CPCA)** and **Inclusive Therapists Canada** – these groups are also available to connect people with appropriately qualified and licensed professionals. For low-cost or sliding-scale options check out the **Affordable Therapy Network (ATN)**. Federal sources include **Wellness Together** and the **Mental Health Commission of Canada**. **Indigenous Services Canada** lists mental health programs and services for First Nations and Inuit communities. The **Hope for Wellness Help Line** offers free 24/7 support to all Indigenous peoples across Canada.

Licensed professionals generally offer both virtual and in-person services and are required to ensure that adequate safeguards are in place to ensure all virtual conversations are private and secure.

References

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2. Canadian Mental Health Association. (2023). *Access to mental health care in Canada*. <https://cmha.ca>
3. Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (2022). *What to expect when you come to CAMH*. <https://www.camh.ca/en/patients-and-families/information-for-patients/what-to-expect>
4. Arthritis Consumer Experts. (2021, April). *ACE National Survey on virtual care for people living with arthritis* [Survey summary]. JointHealth™ insight. <https://jointhehealth.org/programs-jhinsight-view.cfm?id=1265&locale=en-CA>
5. Arthritis Consumer Experts. (2021, May). *ACE National Survey on virtual care services for people living with arthritis: Examining virtual health inequities* [Survey summary]. JointHealth™ insight. <https://jointhehealth.org/programs-jhinsight-view.cfm?id=1267&locale=en-CA>