

CPS is here for you—in three weeks



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BY KATIE SANTAMARIA | OCTOBER 18, 2018, 12:21 AM

“Are you thinking of hurting yourself or others?” “No.” “Okay. The next available appointment is in three weeks.”

Three weeks. Columbia Counseling and Psychological Services may not realize it, but a lot can happen in three weeks. You can form a habit, start a rock band, or plan a surprise party. You can even log on to the CPS website, find your appointment with the psychologist you talked to on the phone, and cancel it. All it takes is one moment of weakness to cancel an appointment, and you don't even have to face a real human being to do it.

It's ridiculous how much harder it is to make an in-person appointment than to cancel one. To make one, you must first call and schedule a pre-appointment phone call with the therapist to run through your symptoms. If you have a roommate, it can be hard to find a private space on campus to have such an emotional, vulnerable conversation. Then, you show up to the in-person appointment three weeks later and re-explain your situation which gets to be utterly exhausting.

Yet, this is only the beginning of the waiting game. CPS offers drop-in hours, but in order to treat mental illness in the long-term, you must first set up an appointment with CPS, then be referred to an outside therapist (this step depends on your insurance), and finally decide whether the therapist fits. Beyond that, if you're trying to be medicated, you must visit an on-campus psychologist, then an on-campus psychiatrist, and finally wait the additional three or so weeks for the medication to become effective. All in all, this process can take months, and the three-week delay only prolongs the pain of ripping off the band-aid and getting the necessary treatment.

I've struggled with mental illness for the entirety of my time at Columbia. After taking the Student Well-Being Survey last spring, I found out that I had scored high enough on the mental illness scale to receive over a dozen charming emails either begging me to take a follow-up survey or urging me to reach out with this message: "The levels of psychological distress you reported were high enough that you might benefit from speaking to a counselor on campus (to make an appointment contact 212-854-2878) or participating in an internet-based program we developed to help students manage their distress."

Six months after taking the survey, I decided to book an appointment with a psychiatrist. If I've learned one thing here, it's that making time to do something is hard, especially when that something makes you feel uneasy or afraid. Calling CPS to book an appointment required strength, and hearing that the next available appointment wasn't until three weeks from then was heartbreaking—especially when Columbia was the one nagging me to do so in the first place.

The morning of my 9 a.m. appointment at CPS, I nearly cancelled. I had a test I was unprepared for later that day, and taking an hour or more to go see a psychiatrist took time away from a cram study session with my classmates. Furthermore, I wasn't even convinced that I needed this appointment or that it would be beneficial to me in any way. I nearly manipulated myself into believing that I'm fine.

When you're mentally unstable, it's easy to doubt yourself and believe that everything you're feeling is in your head. Giving someone who has expressed a need for help such a long wait time not only gives that person the chance to cancel their appointment, but also forces the Columbia administration to rely on the fact that students will show up to their far-off appointments.

Beyond the logistics of this entire process, hearing this initial question enough times on the phone—"Are you thinking of harming yourself or others?"—made me question myself. I didn't think I felt that way, but did I have to feel that way to be treated as important? Did I secretly feel that way, but not know it outwardly? What if I'd said yes?

Fortunately, I don't feel that way, but that doesn't mean that my experience should be deemed invalid or less important. Plenty of people struggle through severe mental illness without these symptoms but still require more immediate medical care—more immediate than three weeks after the fact, at least.

Columbia administration, this is how you can help solve the mental health crisis. Don't give us any more stress-reducing [bananas](#) or self-care nights featuring grilled cheese. Instead, increase staff and availability at CPS to allow for more students to get appointments sooner. Stop spamming us with emails that remind us of our mental illnesses and encourage us to "get help" if you can't guarantee that the help will be readily available. Your precious mental health stats will thank you.

For now, though, I urge anyone reading this—anyone with even the slightest belief that they may benefit from visiting CPS—to make an appointment. The logistics aren't yet ideal, and you may not think you need it, but it's the best thing you can do for yourself right now.

Through [WinkMe](#), a female self-empowerment club, I've learned that saying "I don't have time" is equivalent to "it's not a priority." In this case, saying "I don't have time for therapy" is unfortunately commonplace, but saying "my mental health is not a priority" sounds cruel. Your mental health is a priority, and as long as CPS fails to shorten wait times, three weeks is worth the wait. You're worth the wait.

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