

Access to Mental Health Services

September 6, 2022

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Survey Overview

This survey ran on the UASU Perks platform from August 31 to September 6, 2022. It reached 1259 points of contact, a response rate of 27% based on Perks users in that time frame. The vast majority of Perks users are current undergraduate students.

- 21% of returning students tried to access University/campus mental health (MH) services in the past year (12% once or twice, 9% several times).
- Attempted service usage was highest among third-year students.
- Attempted service usage was very high among Augustana and CSJ students, within the limits of our sample. Other high rates of attempted service usage were noticed in Nursing, ALES, Arts, KSR, and Education. Engineering and Science were the middle-of-the-road cases. (7% 'Yes, several times,' ~10% 'Yes, once or twice.')
- A near-zero number of students in Business, Native Studies, Medicine and Dentistry, Law, and Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences selected 'Yes, several times,' which may suggest issues of access and stigma.
- Text responses reveal a breadth of experiences.
 - Overall, when students manage to secure MH support service appointments, their responses tend to be positive.
 - However, extremely common barriers include long wait times and limited staff availability.
 - Support in French and for students who have English as a second language came up frequently.
 - Many students report their concerns being dismissed, and some also report radically inappropriate and uninformed counseling around, for example, autism and eating disorders.
 - Several students asked for secure space to take remote counseling appointments due to confidentiality/safety at home.
 - Several students with disabilities or limited mobility reported access issues around campus.
 - Complex, frustrating access processes were commonly cited, especially by students with ADHD.¹

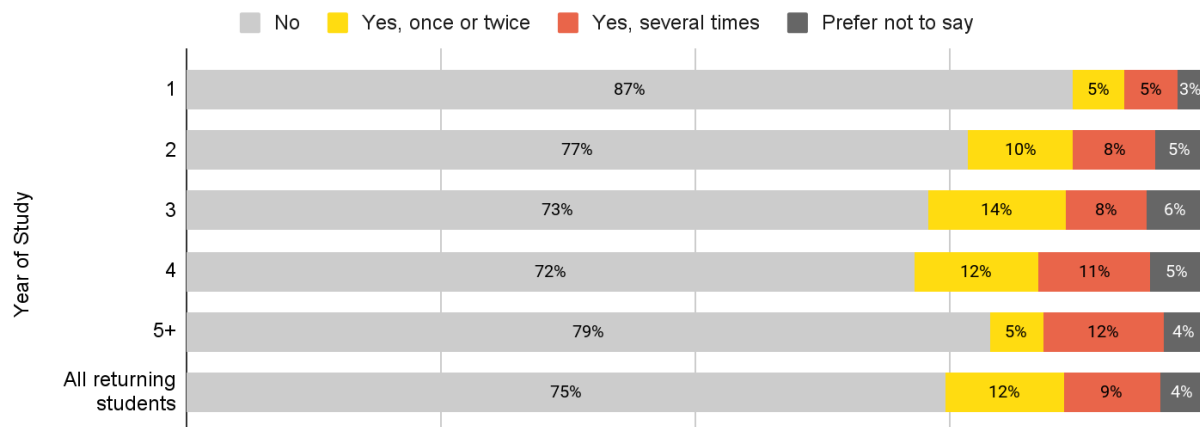
¹ Per 2019 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) data, 3.9% of UAlberta students have ADHD.

"We're fighting for better mental health support funding, and we'd like to know about students' actual experiences trying to access University/campus mental health services. As with all Perks surveys, this one is anonymous. Within the last year, have you tried to access University/campus mental health services?"

Looking specifically at current students who have been students in the past year, 12% had tried once or twice to access University/campus MH services in the past year, and another 9% had done so several times. Usage appeared highest in students' third year, as reported by fourth-year students.

Within the last year, have you tried to access University/campus mental health services?

Excluding non-students (recent graduates) and students who selected 'Haven't been a student in the last year'



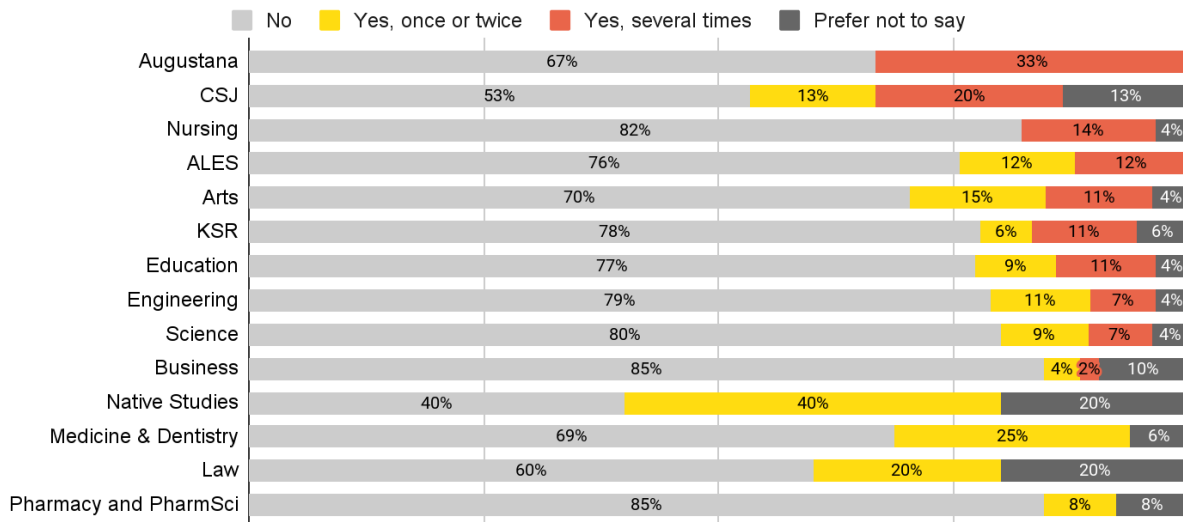
Though the number of respondents in smaller faculties makes the following results uncertain, it seems clear that the most likely students to attempt to access University/campus MH services are in the satellite campuses: Campus Saint-Jean and Augustana.

Other faculties with high rates of 'Yes, several times' included Nursing, ALES, Arts, KSR, and Education.

Conversely, there may be room to explore stigma and other access issues around faculties where almost no students selected 'Yes, several times': Business, Native Studies, Medicine and Dentistry, Law, and Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences.

Within the last year, have you tried to access University/campus mental health services?

Excluding non-students (recent graduates) and students who selected 'Haven't been a student in the last year'



"If you've tried to access University/campus mental health services, what was your experience like? Positive, negative? Anything we should know?"

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'Yes, several times'

- Amazing. Love Jake Tremblay.
- Difficult to find links.
- CCS Psychology: Not great. Briefly saw psychologist there, he knew absolutely nothing about autism (I am autistic) and I would spend entire appointments trying to teach stuff to him so he could even slightly understand me. CCS Psychiatry: Terrible. First psychiatrist ignored repeated requests for psychiatric assessment for various concerns, would never ask how I was and instead would make assumptions that I "look well", would spend appointments talking about weather/classes etc instead of doing his job, did prescribe meds but for what I can't say as I was never diagnosed with anything. Second one made a "diagnosis" after talking to me for 20 minutes. He skipped so many questions he should have asked regarding my concerns, made loads of incorrect assumptions and when I tried to correct him he told me I was wrong and he was the professional, and said things about conditions that are very inaccurate and unprofessional.
- For what I accessed it was positive.
- Hard to access, long wait times to get seen.

- Holy shit it was evil. The website says "we recommend accessing our free options due to an overload" - which although fair, is worded as more of a "don't even try" instead of "use this while waiting for a professional". The free options? An app that doesn't even work. Like damn. Also the website wasn't updated, so sent me through a rabbit hole with a different app's company just to find out the UofA isn't with them anymore. So like... fix that? lol
- I got affordable therapy with a practicum psych student through Clinical Services and it was helpful. Shout out to Rachel. The downside is wait times, and that it's mostly short term options.
- I have contacted a mental health support at one of the organizations I utilize. She was a big help with everything from financial supports to resources. It was extremely positive. However, I did have a negative experience at the sexual assault center. It felt unsafe.
- It was both positive and negative. The actual mental health workers were fairly friendly, however the receptionist made me feel horrible.
- It was good, I liked the counseling place.
- It was really difficult to get a hold of them, so negative. They are severely overbooked. Wait times for an initial appointment are long.
- It was really difficult to get an appointment, and once I did I was referred to off-campus services.
- It was very helpful.
- It's absolutely atrocious in the Fall/Winter. I was only able to access services in the Spring.
- Looked at the website and gave up.
- Needs to be more accessible, promoted, and more funding.
- Negative; hard to reach and often reschedules.
- Negative. I had trouble keeping in contact with anyone or getting an email response at all. Once appointments were set up, they were missed by the appointed counselor (online meetings).
- Negative. Never got into the line to speak to an experienced professional. Outside ones were expensive.
- Not a lot of availability in French.
- Not the best. They were always fully booked for weeks and every time I came back they were still booked. I wasn't able to make an appointment because they told me they only make appointments for one week at a time.

- Positive at the SAC.
- Positive, mostly, but seems like there's not enough to meet the demand.
- Positive, it can be hard to get an initial appointment though.
- Positive. I've gone to a couple of the CCS online workshops and I've enjoyed both of them, especially the ADHD workshop.
- The experience of using Empower Me felt negative, it is better to use in-person counselling in CCS.
- Their services were full- no one was available for therapy or diagnosis.
- Was not able to get in and gave up trying. Called early in the morning multiple times, showed up early multiple times and still couldn't get anything.

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'Yes, once or twice'

- Fairly good though I've had a doctor at the mental health center since like 2019. It's super nice to have access to doctors who are used to working with students and are familiar with things like ADHD.
- Felt completely inaccessible/would not receive service in an appropriate amount of time.
- From an email that had a telephone mental health service I had 10 sessions with someone that wasn't very helpful.
- Frustrating, workshops were consistently offered at the same times throughout the semester and I couldn't make any because they were the same times as my classes.
- Hard to get ahold of people/resources. When actually talking to people they're nice.
- I accessed mental health services through FPH. My experience was okay but I'm having trouble finding someone I can connect with about my issues.
- I couldn't find the in-person office :(
- I found it difficult to find out what specific services were available if I didn't have the U of A insurance plan.
- I tried calling once and they were closed and never tried again. That's on me not them.
- It feels like they are constantly over booked and no room for other students who need help.

- It was a positive experience. It was a volunteer group from the U of A that I went to, not staff-led.
- It was good but the processing time to get in was long and unorganized and I wished there were more structured resources.
- It was middling, I need access to long term counseling but all that is offered is short term.
- It was positive once I finally got an appointment but it was negative when trying to book the first appointment because there was very limited availability.
- It was very negative. The therapist made me feel like I wasn't anxious enough for therapy lol.
- Mostly negative due to lack of availability, people qualified to deal with my issues, etc.
- Negative, there was a week long or more wait and I needed help right then.
- Negative, they told me that I can't "go to a restaurant" and not know what I want to order. When someone is feeling like they have a mental health problem and you dismiss them like that it hurts, I still haven't forgotten the experience. I know the CCS is busy but that's not a good way to treat people in intake consults.
- Negative. They were very dismissive and simply dumped a pile forms into my hands without explaining anything.
- Neutral leaning negative. It was difficult to get even an initial consult cause the wait list was so long, and I was basically just given pamphlets to read and sent on my way without follow-up.
- Neutral, seemed like they were reading off of a script.
- Never responded after multiple emails.
- Positive with CCS, they referred me to the Wellness Centre after the initial consultation, and I still use those services. I think my issue was uniquely manageable though, I can see this process being troublesome and unhelpful for others.
- Seems like there are a lot of steps, such a process in order to see someone.
- Somewhat negative, my mental health wasn't in danger but I really wanted to reach out to a councillor. However, all the appointments were booked up for another two-three weeks.
- The receptionist at the CCS is super nice!

- The website was really confusing, I didn't like getting rerouted to a whole new website for my appointment.
- They ghosted me :(
- They sent me to a third party and the coaches there were bad and I felt like I'd rather just look up the help I wanted online and then get university coverage for that particular person instead of having to gamble a risk that the random coach uni sends me to is inadequate.
- Too long of wait list at Sexual Assault Centre so I just gave up on trying to use university resources for that.
- Wait time required months, discouraged me from trying again.
- Was unable to access or find clear instructions.

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'No'

- Did not know where to access.
- Have not had to myself but I have heard other people have had decent experiences reaching out.
- Have not tried to access it because the people I know who tried to go either felt dismissed or the waiting times were ridiculous.
- I had a negative experience a few years ago. Apparently I didn't seem in enough distress in the initial screening appointment so I never had the opportunity to see a psychologist. A few years later I sought other help and was diagnosed with depression and ADHD.
- I have reached out to inquire about certain services and it was positive feedback. People were kind and patient.
- I haven't because I've heard how difficult it is to get help.
- I think there should be a way to contact them easier.
- I wish to access these services but have not passed the barrier of being comfortable to reach out.
- In my first year, my experience was negative. My counsellor told me to count calories in response to me talking about disordered eating.²

² This deeply concerning response suggests a need for a more informed approach to helping students deal with disordered eating. In the 2019 NCHA data, 1.9% of UAlberta students struggled with an eating disorder/problem, 1.3% had a BMI over 40 (noting that BMI is a deeply flawed measure and not necessarily linked to disordered eating), 1.4% had been diagnosed with anorexia in the previous year, and 1.2% had been diagnosed with bulimia in the previous year. In short, hundreds of students face related challenges.

- It has been positive, mainly because I've been assured multiple times that it is available.
- It was good they referred me to a... brain doctor?? Because turns out I had a concussion.
- Learned about resources specifically for first years that I had no idea existed as a first year. Need more publicity and advertising.
- Negative. There is no long-term support.
- The campus mental health services were so overloaded that unless I was actively suicidal, I would be referred elsewhere. I would also only be able to access short-term mental health support.
- There's not enough psychologists.
- They are really helpful.

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'Prefer not to say'

- I tried to access campus mental health services over a year ago and there were very long wait lines.
- Not very good. They make it difficult to come back.

"Are there any accessibility barriers that prevent you from using University/campus mental health services?"

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'Yes, several times'

- Availability of counsellors.
- University therapists seemed to be understaffed and their work was not very personalized nor genuine.
- For some reason accessing services is made as if the people needing them aren't neurodivergent.
- I'm neurodiverse (autism and ADHD) and most professionals at the U of A are not trained to help people who function different from the norm. They don't understand the additional challenges we have, how things present differently in us, or even about our diagnoses.
- After so many bad experiences both at the U of A and community I am really hesitant to see anyone else or reach out anymore in fear it will happen again and cause me more trauma and upset.
- Hard to schedule times.
- I'm aware that they're almost constantly booked. I think I'm less high risk so I sometimes feel guilty taking spots from someone who may need it more.
- Language barriers for those whose English is not their native language.

- My internet and unstable home environment last semester made only virtual appointments.
- No, although I think it depends on availability of the services since some services that I do not use are more busy.
- Not enough mental health staff = not enough appointments available = no mental health services for me despite paying for them.
- Sometimes I can't find the correct room.
- There's not nearly enough staff to serve the growing population of students and their needs.
- They're too busy and told me to come back another time and every time I came back they told me the same thing.
- Unavailability of enough trained professionals.
- Wasn't enough therapists.

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'Yes, once or twice'

- All the things I need to do to access university mental health services are things I struggle with as someone with ADHD (the thing I need help with) which makes it a long and arduous process.
- Amount of services - wait list is far too long for either short term/small issues and longer term/bigger issues.
- Fear. Parents. Not knowing how to best go about things.
- Hard to navigate available resources.
- I don't have a flexible schedule for appointments when they do have openings.
- I have to contact them by phone. I need to be able to book online tbh.
- I received 1 response from someone and then never again after multiple replies.
- I'm having trouble finding a counsellor/ therapist who I can connect with and feel judgement free.
- It doesn't feel welcoming walking in.
- Just that I live fairly far away so it'd be out of my way to go to campus for services outside of class hours.
- Money, can't afford to pay for any services and campus ones are all full.
- My internet is really slow so I have trouble logging on.
- No way to book a consult in advance. I had to call three different days right when they first opened to get an appointment before they all filled up. I struggle with executive function so this was quite challenging.
- None of the counsellors are very knowledgeable about polyamory.
- Stigma.
- There should be virtual therapy options and private rooms AT the university you can go to do it virtually. Because like I'd rather do it virtually but then the same people I'm complaining to the therapist about can hear me on the virtual call.
- Too many steps and instructions for my disability.
- Was discouraging/frustrating when suffering from motivation/depression/ADHD issues.

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'No'

- Abuser has a choke hold on all the resources.
- Afraid to ask for help.

- Being nervous or anxious about talking to someone you don't know. Maybe have an anonymous option.
- Being referred to somewhere else because they are full, but don't go because I don't have the courage to seek further help.
- Campus wide reports of long wait times for services.
- Consider having more diverse help for every student whose mother language is not English.
- Fear of lack of confidentiality.
- Figuring out how to access or where to access the services as well as who to contact to get more information.
- I do not know where to start. It is not as easy to access cause the steps to break this accessibility barrier like knowing how to get appointment is not as common knowledge.
- I haven't been to the services on campus, I plan to go this year. But I don't know if my advisor will stay consistent or alternate like it does for peer support services. I'd prefer it to be with one person, so I can build a relationship for the whole school year and get the support I need during the most difficult part of the term.
- I haven't tried to access them even tho I should cuz I feel like other people's problems are more important than mine and I don't want to "clog the system" or take time away from others.
- I personally believe there should be more focus on the prevention of mental health issues rather than dealing with them after the fact.
- I tried booking for a service once and there was literally only one slot available for the following three months.
- I'm not on campus often, feel scared to, not sure if what I'm dealing with is valid for mental health support (I would appreciate services that focus on general well being not just targeting help with specific issues).
- I've wanted to reach out for mental health services but I couldn't find a clear way and then it stressed me out.
- I've heard that waiting times are abysmal so that probably.
- It's hard to find the time and just overall confidentiality issues that are a worry.
- Just the stigma itself but nothing else aside from that.
- My friends volunteer there. I don't want to speak to them about it.
- No, but it would be helpful to know the cultural background behind the counsellors as some mental health issues stem from cultural perspectives and stigmas.
- Not much information advertised on the actual WHERE to go to get help.
- Not personally, but I have learned that mental health services for students in residence are especially poor.
- Not sure what's available aside from Peer Support Centre.
- Original consultation isn't long enough to cover topics.
- Recognizability. Don't want people knowing I'm accessing.
- Someone should say where they are once in a while instead of just saying they exist I think.

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'Prefer not to say'

- I don't like how it's short term. I have dealt with a lot in my life, and I am not going to open up to someone regarding all of it only to be told I get a limited number of sessions with them. I know why it's short term though. I do get it. Also when I was going to the counselling clinic in SUB, there was no way to email to make appointments. Only in person or calling. It's why I stopped actually, as I really hate phone calls as they make me anxious.

"Are there any other accessibility barriers that get in the way of your education or involvement in the University community?"

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'Yes, several times'

- Access to academic advisors.
- I have some diagnosed mental illness issues as well as one other undiagnosed issue, making it difficult at times.
- Language barriers for English as Second Language speakers too.
- Mental health problems . Accessibility for auditory processing and autism.
- My neurodiversity and anxiety. ADHD makes coursework sometimes inaccessible, autism makes classrooms and social situations inaccessible, and anxiety makes new environments, people, and any interaction inaccessible.
- Professors not helping with providing accommodations (experienced this last year) during class.
- Yes, my disability makes coming to campus dangerous (immune compromised) and extremely exhausting (chronic fatigue).

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'Yes, once or twice'

- A lack of quiet spaces around campus where people who are easily overwhelmed by noise and motion can gather but don't have to be completely silent (such as the quiet library floors). I want to be around people and make connections but the noisy and crowded gathering areas are overwhelming.
- After having experienced online classes, as a full time worker I'm going to miss the flexibility of being able to take my classes from home and work. It made it easier.
- I do not have this issue, but i've noticed that walkways are very icy in winter near CCIS and that if you have a lower body injury it is nigh impossible to get between buildings in 10 minutes for class.
- In general, needing to make phone calls. Also getting accommodations for ADHD is hard because there's so many tasks and steps that I have to do. That's the exact thing I can't do because of ADHD.
- It's embarrassing walking out of that hallway because everyone knows what's down there.
- Mainly just my health conditions. Specifically, the services on campus are good for my particular case. I have brain fog as a symptom which doesn't allow me to fully discover alternatives to what I've found already.
- People often stare at me. (I have a physical deformity.)

- Profs who are not understanding. While I do not have official accommodations, I have asked profs as something as simple as “could you speak louder in your recordings” to be met with scathing emails in return. Profs should be helping their students learn.
- Requirement/expectation to take 6-7 classes in my faculty, profs not honoring accommodations.
- Some places or quite accessible without stairs or going well out of the way for the elevator.

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'No'

- Budget and program cuts to accessibility services. (Note takers.)
- Have to work part time of complete 20 hours as an international student to actually live with a little peace of mind which makes attending certain activities in the evening impossible which is depressing.
- How hard it is to get an adult autism diagnosis 😞
- I have a respiratory disease and I'm worried people will think I have covid because it makes me cough but it's just chronic and not contagious.
- I live far away so if I want to stay late or something for a campus activity I will have to submit myself to getting home VERY late.
- I think a lot of people don't know where to find information and the resources that are available to them.
- Long commute times with public transit, lack of affordable parking options on campus. High cost for food on campus.
- Many students have been online for the last two years and now the school is in person without any support or guidance. I have no idea where anything is.
- Not feeling involved being an international student. People see differently.
- Not that I've noticed. I'm pretty happy with my academic accommodation resources.
- Queer/transphobia.
- The biggest shift with the biggest impact has been downgrading accommodations to AI tech that isn't ready for that kind of use yet. Not having notetakers is significantly impacting my post secondary journey.
- The heat 🔥
- Type 1 diabetes and complications.

Noteworthy/representative responses from students who selected 'Prefer not to say'

- I think I have ADHD and it makes learning hard. Especially online learning, so most of my post secondary education so far :/
- Please lower tuition.