

Laura E. Forsyth, Ph.D.

1601 Carmen Drive, Suite 211Camarillo, CA 93010

805.795.2131

dr.lauraforsyth@yahoo.com

Psychotherapy Services, Policies & Agreement

Welcome to my practice. This document contains important information about my professional services and business policies. Please read it carefully and jot down any questions you might have so that we can discuss them at our next meeting. When you sign the 'Consent for Treatment' on the Intake & Consent, this agreement will represent a contract between us.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

Psychotherapy is not easily described in general statements. It varies depending on the personalities of the psychologist and patient, and the specific problems you bring forward. There are many different methods I may use to deal with the problems that you hope to address. Psychotherapy is not like a medical doctor visit. Instead, it calls for a very active effort on your part. In order for the therapy to be most successful, you will have to work on things we talk about both during our sessions and at home.

Psychotherapy can have benefits and risks. Since therapy often involves discussing unpleasant aspects of your life, you may experience uncomfortable feelings like sadness, guilt, anger, frustration, loneliness, and helplessness. On the other hand, psychotherapy has also been shown to have benefits for people who go through it. Therapy often leads to better relationships, solutions to specific problems, and significant reductions of distress. But there are no guarantees of what you will experience.

Our first few sessions will involve an evaluation of your needs. By the end of the evaluation, I will be able to offer you some first impressions of what our work will include and a treatment plan to follow, if you decide to continue with therapy. You should evaluate this information along with your own opinions of whether you feel comfortable working with me. Therapy involves a large commitment of time, money, and energy, so you should be very careful about the therapist you select. If you have questions about my procedures, we should discuss them whenever they arise. If your doubts persist, I will be happy to help you set up a meeting with another mental health professional for a second opinion.

MEETINGS

I normally conduct an evaluation during the first several sessions. During this time, we can both decide if I am the best person to provide the services you need in order to meet your treatment goals. If psychotherapy is begun, I will usually schedule one 50-minute session per week at a time we agree on, although some sessions may be longer or more frequent. **Once an appointment hour is scheduled, you will be expected to pay for it unless you provide 48 hours advance notice of cancellation.** If it is possible, I will try to find another time to reschedule the appointment.

FEES

The fee for a **50 minute** therapy session is **\$130**; a **75 minute** intake or extended session is **\$155**. In addition to weekly appointments, I charge a prorated amount for other professional services you may need. These other services include report writing, phone calls or emails correspondence lasting more than 15 minutes in a week, extensive attendance at meetings with other professionals you have authorized, preparation of records or treatment summaries, or any other service you may request of me.

Session fees are paid at the beginning of each session; I accept cash, checks and regular credit cards. If you choose to **pay with cash or check**, I will reduce the fee for a regular session to **\$125**, an extended session will be **\$150**.

Established patients may also use online banking services to send their session fees or copays directly from their bank.

BILLING AND PAYMENTS

You will be expected to pay for each session, either session fee or copay, when we meet, at the beginning of the session. If other professional services are needed, payment arrangements must be made in advance. In circumstances of unusual

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financial hardship, I may be willing to negotiate a fee adjustment or payment installment plan. If your account has not been paid for more than 60 days and arrangements for payment have not been agreed upon, I have the option of using legal means to secure the payment, such as a collection agency or small claims court. If such legal action is necessary, its costs will be included in the claim.

I am happy to provide you with a monthly statement that includes dates/type of service, and can include diagnosis and the appropriate billing codes to submit to your insurance company or Health Savings Account for reimbursement. Please ask for a statement, as I do not provide them routinely.

If someone else will be paying for your services, e.g., a parent paying for a college student's treatment, you must give me permission to discuss our financial arrangements with that person, as necessary.

Because of ethical issues, I will not be able to schedule sessions for clients missing more than one payment for any fee. Please talk to me if you find yourself in this situation; if you are still having problems, we may be able to work out an agreement or find you alternative sources of professional help.

If there is any problem with my charges, my billing, your insurance, or any other money-related point, please bring it to my attention. I will do the same with you. Such problems can interfere greatly with our work, so they must be worked out openly and quickly.

INSURANCE REIMBURSEMENT

In order for us to set realistic treatment goals and priorities, it is important to evaluate what resources you have available to pay for your treatment. If you have health insurance it may provide some coverage for mental health treatment. I will provide you with whatever assistance I can in helping you receive the benefits to which you are entitled; however, you (not your insurance company) are responsible for full payment of my fees. It is very important that you find out exactly what mental health services your insurance policy covers before starting treatment. It is always best to call and ask to confirm your benefit, and whether/to what degree they will cover my fee if I am not a provider with your insurance.

You should also be aware that most insurance companies require you to authorize me to provide them with a clinical diagnosis. Sometimes I have to provide additional clinical information such as treatment plans or summaries, or copies of the entire record (in rare cases). This information will become part of the insurance company files and will probably be stored in a computer. Though all insurance companies claim to keep such information confidential, I have no control over what they do with it once it is in their hands. In some cases, they may share the information with a national medical information databank. I will provide you with a copy of any report I submit, if you request it.

Once we have all of the information about your insurance coverage, we will discuss what we can expect to accomplish with the benefits that are available and what will happen if they run out before you feel ready to end our sessions. It is important to remember that you always have the right to pay for my services yourself.

LEGAL MATTERS

I am not a forensic psychologist, evaluator, or mediator. I will refrain from making recommendations or rendering an opinion in legal proceedings. If you become involved in legal proceedings that require my participation, I will discuss in detail the limits of my participation. In any legal matter, you will be expected to pay for my professional time even if I am called to testify by another party. Because of the difficulty of legal involvement, I charge \$400 per hour for all related activities including preparation, telephone consultations, document preparation, travel time, and attendance at any legal proceeding.

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CONTACTING ME

I am often not immediately available by telephone. When I am unavailable, my telephone is answered by voice mail that I monitor frequently. I will make every effort to return your call on the same day you make it, with the exception of weekends and holidays. If you are difficult to reach, please inform me of some times when you will be available. If you are unable to reach me and feel that you can't wait for me to return your call, contact your family physician, call 911, or go the nearest hospital emergency room.

E-MAILS, FAXES, CELL PHONES, COMPUTERS, SEARCHING & SOCIAL MEDIA

It is very important to be aware that computers and e-mail and cell phone communication can be relatively easily accessed by unauthorized people and hence can compromise the privacy and confidentiality of such communication. E-mails, in particular, are vulnerable to such unauthorized access due to the fact that servers have unlimited and direct access to all e-mails that go through them. Email sent to my yahoo address is not encrypted. If desired, you may use my encrypted email account at dr.lauraforsyth@hushmail.com for correspondence. Emails are printed and become part of your clinical record.

It is always a possibility that faxes can be sent erroneously to the wrong address and computers, including laptops, may be stolen. My computers are all equipped with a firewall, virus protection and passwords. Confidential information on my computers is stored in an encrypted format. Please notify me if you decide to avoid or limit, in any way, the use of e-mails, cell phones or faxes, or storage of confidential information on computers. If you communicate confidential or private information via e-mail, I will assume that you have made an informed decision, will view it as your agreement to take the risk that such communication may be intercepted, and I will honor your desire to communicate on such matters via e-mail. Email is best used for questions that require only a brief reply; please remember that I must bill for the time required to think over and draft an extended reply.

Please do not use e-mail, text messages or faxes for emergencies. Due to computer or network problems, e-mails may not be deliverable, and **I do not check my e-mail daily.**

I do store contact information on my smartphone; contacts are password protected, hidden, and will be erased if someone attempts to access them without the password. I do use text messaging, primarily to confirm appointments and for scheduling. If you do not wish to use texting, please tell me.

It is NOT a regular part of my practice to search for clients on Google or Facebook or other search engines. Extremely rare exceptions may be made during times of crisis. If I have a reason to suspect that you are in danger and you have not been in touch with me via our usual means (coming to appointments, phone, or email) there might be an instance in which using a search engine (to find you, find someone close to you, or to check on your recent status updates) becomes necessary as part of ensuring your welfare. These are unusual situations and if I ever resort to such means, I will fully document it and discuss it with you when we next meet.

I do not accept friend or contact requests from current or former clients on any social networking site (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc). I believe that adding clients as friends or contacts on these sites can compromise your confidentiality and our respective privacy. It may also blur the boundaries of our therapeutic relationship. If you have questions about this, please bring them up when we meet and we can talk more about it.

PROFESSIONAL RECORDS

The laws and standards of my profession require that I keep treatment records. You are entitled to receive a copy of the records unless I believe that seeing them would be emotionally damaging, in which case I will be happy to send them to a mental health professional of your choice. Because these are professional records, they can be misinterpreted and/or upsetting to untrained readers. I recommend that you review them in my presence so that we can discuss the contents. Patients will be charged an appropriate fee for any time spent in preparing information requests.

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MINORS

If you are under eighteen years of age, please be aware that the law may provide your parents the right to examine your treatment records. It is my policy to request an agreement from parents that they agree to give up access to your records. If they agree, I will provide them only with general information about our work together, unless I feel there is a high risk that you will seriously harm yourself or someone else. In this case, I will notify them of my concern. I will also provide them with a summary of your treatment when it is complete. Before giving them any information, I will discuss the matter with you, if possible, and do my best to handle any objections you may have with what I am prepared to discuss.

CONFIDENTIALITY

In general, the privacy of all communications between a patient and a psychologist is protected by law, and I can only release information about our work to others, including any acknowledgement of contact, with your written permission. But there are a few exceptions.

If I believe that a patient is threatening serious bodily harm to another, I am required to take protective actions. These actions may include notifying the potential victim, contacting the police, or seeking hospitalization for the patient. If the patient threatens to harm himself/herself, I may be obligated to seek hospitalization for him/her or to contact family members or others who can help provide safety.

There are some situations in which I am legally obligated to take action to protect other people from harm, even if I have to reveal some information about a patient's treatment. For example, if I believe that a child, an elderly person, or a severe disabled person is being abused or neglected, I am required to file a report with the appropriate agency or authority.

In most legal proceedings, you have the right to prevent me from providing any information about your therapy. In some proceedings involving child custody and those in which your emotional condition is an important issue, a judge may order my testimony if he/she determines that the issues demand it. If I am subpoenaed and cannot contact you to obtain your consent due to some barrier, such as no current contact information or your non-response, I must disclose.

These situations rarely occur in my practice. If one should occur, I will make every effort to discuss it with you before taking any action, but may need to act regardless.

I may occasionally find it helpful to consult other professionals about a case. During a consultation, I make every effort to avoid revealing the identity of my patient. The consultant is also legally bound to keep the information confidential. If you don't object, I will not tell you about these consultations unless I feel that it is important to our work together.

It is important that we discuss any questions or concerns that you may have. I will be happy to discuss these issues with you if you need specific advice, but formal legal advice may be needed because the laws governing confidentiality are quite complex, and I am not an attorney.

COMPLAINTS

If you are unhappy with what is happening in therapy, I hope you'll talk with me about it so I can respond to your concerns. I will take such feedback seriously, and respond with care and respect. If you believe that I've been unwilling to listen and respond, or that I have behaved unethically, you may make a complaint to the California Board of Psychology (www.psychboard.ca.gov). You are free to discuss your concerns about me with anyone you wish, and you do not have any responsibility to maintain confidentiality about me, since you are the person who has the right to decide what you want kept confidential about your therapy.

If you have any questions about these policies, please discuss them with me before signing the Consent for Treatment on the Intake & Consent form. Your signature indicates your agreement.