

Finding Help:

Mental Healthcare in Taipei

By Daniel Mojahedi

Illustrated by Wu Meng-yun



Perry Malcolm and Cynthia Teeters sit back in their chairs and smile. Although they are about to be interviewed, our conversation is void of the fidgeting and nervous laughter I usually encounter when I pull out my pen and notepad. They have the relaxed composure of people who are used to engaging in deep, interpersonal communication. They should. Both serve as counselors at the Community Services Center, also known as The Center, in



Taipei and have been practicing for several years both here and in the United States, from which they came. While the two came here for family reasons (both are married to Taiwanese spouses), they are a part of a growing family of mental-healthcare professionals living in the city.

While the city has had some form of Western healthcare since George Mackay first landed here over a hundred and thirty years ago, Taipei, like all other Asian cities, is just now developing the ability to meet its citizens' emotional needs. In this article we will look at what resources are available for those seeking professional mental healthcare and find out what the National Health Insurance program does and does not cover.

Taipei's Mental Healthcare Professionals

Psychiatrists, doctors trained to deal with the biological side of mental disorders, are a more common sight in Taipei's medical facilities than psychologists, who deal more with the emotional side of issues. Unfortunately, because of the enormous caseloads that Taiwanese doctors are asked to handle, psychiatrists here are not always given a lot of time with their patients. "When I went in to meet with the psychiatrist, he did not keep me there long and did not ask many questions," notes one foreign patient who was first diagnosed abroad but continued treatment here. "Certainly no in-depth questions relating to my problem."

This, however, does not mean that the doctor is going to neglect your needs. It is just that, within such a system, patients from the West might not get as much time with the doctor as they are used to back home. "The doctor is not going to just give you a bunch of pills and send you on your way," notes Joshua Xu (許超彥), a third-year resident at Taipei City Hospital (臺北市立聯合醫院). "And if you are concerned about what you are getting, just ask why you are being given a specific medication."

Indeed, it is at least partially the responsibility of the patient to facilitate communication. "Make sure the psychiatrist understands everything you are saying," notes Malcolm, "instead of just finishing the session and getting bum-rushed out the door."

It is somewhat difficult to directly attain the services of a psychologist or counselor through the island's healthcare system. Hospitals ask that patients first visit a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist, after his or her first consultation with the patient, can then recommend the patient to a psychologist.

Resources

This does not mean that psychologists and counselors are nowhere to be found. One great place foreigners can go for such services is the Community Services Center, a local non-profit organization that serves the needs of foreigners living in and around Taipei. All of its counselors are Western-trained and certified professionals and most are native English speakers. The Community Services Center only offers counseling and does not have any psychiatrists on staff. However, its counselors are more than willing to help patients in attaining the services of a psychiatrist. "We often refer patients to psychiatrists," says Teeters, "and can accompany them to their sessions to facilitate their therapy." The Center can be found in Tianmu at No. 25, Alley 290, Section 6, Zhongshan North Road (中山北路). The phone number is (02) 2836-8134 and its website can be found at www.community.com.tw.

Granted, it is not a must that you go to a Westerner for assistance, and getting to Tianmu can be quite a hike for those living in central and southern parts of the city. Fortunately, the fact that Taiwan's mental-healthcare industry is so young does bring with it one advantage for foreigners; many of the professionals who serve in this field are Western trained, since there were, until recently, very few places for them to study on the island.

One place to go is the Family & Couple Therapy Center (家族治療中心). Despite what its name suggests, the center provides counseling for all sorts of people and situations; not just family counseling. All its counselors are Taiwanese, but most have been trained abroad and can speak English. The Family & Couple Therapy Center is located near Taiwan Normal University (臺灣師範大學) at 6F, No. 28 Lishui Street, (麗水街). The phone number is (02) 2932-3528, ext. 29.



Spending quality family time is as important as living your busy life.

National Taiwan University Hospital (台大醫院) has also recently opened a specialized clinic designed exclusively for meeting the medical needs of foreigners, including those needing to meet with a psychiatrist or psychologist. It is located at the university's main hospital at No. 7 Zhongshan South Road (中山南路). It can be reached at (02) 2312-3456, ext. 5992.

All major hospitals, including National Taiwan University Hospital, Cathay Hospital (國泰醫院), and Taipei City Hospital (聯合醫院), also have their own psychiatric units. Cathay can be found at No. 280, Section 4, Renai Road (仁愛路) and can be reached at (02) 2708-2121. Unfortunately the automated answering service you reach by this number does not have an English service. Taipei City Hospital—Songde Branch (松德院區) can be found in the Xinyi District (信義區) at No. 309 Songde Road (松德路). Their phone number is (02) 2726-3141. Dial 0 for English assistance.

In the event of a crisis, the Community Services Center

offers an emergency-counseling number, where a counselor can be reached twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. That number is 0918-789-051. If someone you know reaches such a state where they are an immediate threat to themselves or to others, The Center advises you to first call an ambulance, preferably with a Chinese speaker around to explain the situation to the medics. Once that has been done, call The Center.



A healthy and happy life is what we're all seeking for. (photo courtesy of Amanda Dowsly)

Costs

Taiwan's National Health Insurance (NHI) covers the majority of costs incurred while seeking psychiatric assistance, including doctor's visits and medication. A visit to one of the hospital clinics will cost about NT\$400, depending on where you go. Counseling is also covered by NHI. But, once again, you have to first meet with a psychiatrist before being able to meet with a psychologist. It is worth noting that, in most cases, NHI only covers hospital visits.

Choosing to go to an independent clinic is therefore more expensive, with some centers charging around NT\$4,000 for one ninety-minute session. Granted, the prices are not much more than are seen in some Western countries, but it can be a shock to the system for people who are used to the extremely reasonable prices of healthcare here. These clinics offer a few luxuries, like more time with the doctor, no waiting, and more discretion than can be offered at a crowded hospital. However, the quality of the healthcare is not necessarily any better.

The fees at the Community Services Center are set on a sliding scale based on a patient's income, making sure its services remain affordable regardless of how much a person makes. The Center asks people to call and set a time to meet with them to discuss specific costs. NTUH's clinic for foreigners, despite being a part of the main hospital, is not covered by NHI and charges NT\$500 a first-time registration fee, plus NT\$1,500 per visit.

Often the stress of living in a new country is alone enough to create a need for professional assistance. Culture shock, which all people go through, has been proven to produce depression and anxiety. It can also aggravate preexisting conditions. "If a person is already dealing with emotional problems," notes Malcolm, "then the stresses that come with living in another country just add fuel to the fire."

Seeking and attaining professional counseling is a very understandable and real need for hundreds of foreigners living in Taipei. The Center alone, with its six counselors, hosted 2,000 sessions in 2006. Being immersed in a foreign culture, though it be voluntary, only adds to life's everyday stresses, making expats particularly vulnerable to certain disorders. If you are going through some emotional difficulties, give one of these centers a call. Not doing so would be, well, just crazy. ☺



- Find a professional you feel understands you as a person, be it a foreigner or Taiwanese one.
- Before visiting a hospital, have a friend who speaks Chinese call its psychiatric department and find out which doctors, if any, speak English. The person on the other end of the line might not necessarily know, but you stand a better chance of finding an appropriate doctor than by just having one randomly assigned.
- When taking medication, acquire the services of a counselor to monitor your progress.
- If you are in urgent need of assistance call the Community Services Center emergency number at 0918-789-051.
- If someone is in a state of psychosis and is an imminent threat to themselves or others, call an ambulance.

Photo by Wang Neng-yu

