

UNDERSTANDING REFERRALS

A guide to the referral process and answers
to some common questions about referrals



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Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families



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What is a referral?

A referral is when a professional puts you in contact with a specialist service that can offer you help, support and treatment specific to your issues. Some services accept self referrals, which is where you contact the service yourself.

When do I need a referral?

Not everyone with mental health difficulties will need to be referred to specialist services – sometimes you will receive support or treatment that works without being referred elsewhere. However, in some situations, a professional might see the need for you to work with a service that has more knowledge and experience of your issue, or that can provide more specialist treatment to speed up your recovery.

Who can provide a referral?

Referrals can be made by professionals that work with you, including GP's, teachers, youth workers, educational psychologists, school nurses and social workers. Some services only accept referrals from certain professionals, e.g. they will accept referrals from GP's but not teachers.

If there is a particular service you are interested in accessing, it might be best to get in touch with them and ask which type of professional can provide a referral for you. No one should make a referral for you without first discussing it with you to get your consent. If you are under 16, they may also need to get consent from your parent or guardian to make the referral.

Can I refer myself to a service?

Some services allow self-referrals – you contact them directly and ask if they are able to offer you support or treatment – but not all.

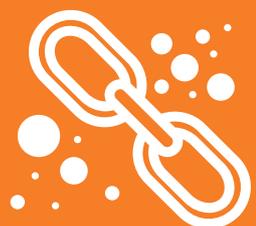
If there is a service that you think would be helpful for you, it is a good idea to get in touch with them or look at their website to see if they accept self-referrals. If they don't, they might be able to explain how to go about getting a suitable referral.

Links to more info:

On My Mind
onmymind.info

Youth Wellbeing Directory
youthwellbeing.co.uk

Receiving support
annafreud.org/on-my-mind/receiving-support/



Can I choose which service I am referred to?

No one should make a referral for you without first discussing it with you to get your consent, and maybe also the consent of a parent or guardian, if you are under 16. You will always have a say in your treatment and recovery.

If your professional suggests a referral to a service you are not comfortable with or you don't think will help you, you can discuss this with them and see if there are alternative options. It's also fine to suggest services that you have found by yourself to see what your professional thinks. However, remember that they will try and refer you to the service that can best help you, so it is important to consider their recommendations carefully before saying no and to remember that they might have reasons for not referring you to somewhere you have suggested.

If you are making a self-referral to a service then the choice is entirely yours, but make sure you check that the service is appropriate for you and offers the sort of help and support you feel you need.

What happens once a referral has been made?

Once a professional has made a referral for you, or you have referred yourself to a service, you should receive confirmation from the service that the referral has been received. This should explain what the next steps are.

Some services might want to get in touch with you quite quickly to find out more about what's going on or conduct an initial assessment to make a plan for your treatment. They might invite you in to speak to them, arrange a time to talk to you on the phone or ask you to complete some questionnaires online.

After this, they will let you know what will happen next – this includes confirming if the service is able to help you and how long you will have to wait to begin working with them.

How long will I have to wait to see a service after being referred?

Waiting times vary from service to service, depending on how many people the service is supporting and how severe or urgent your issue is. You should be told how long you will have to wait before you start working with a service shortly after the referral has been made or after your initial assessment.

What can I do if I don't agree with a referral?

It is important to feel that the support you are getting is the right support for you. If you have been referred to a service and you don't think it is right for you, discuss this with the referrer and ask if there are any other options.

If you have already started receiving support from a service you have been referred to but don't think it's working, speak with the service so they know about your concerns and see if they can make any changes or adjustments that might make it more beneficial for you.

If things still aren't working out, you could speak to the professional who initially referred you for other options or search by yourself or with support from friends or family for different services, such as those found on the Youth Wellbeing Directory.

Can I be referred to more than one service at a time?

Yes. If you have a lot going on, it might be that there is more than one service that can help you. However, sometimes it is better to see one service at a time to ensure you are getting the most from the support and treatment they provide. Your referrer or the service will be able to discuss this with you when the referral is made. If you are already receiving treatment that is working, it is likely that you will continue with this even if you are referred to another service.

Why are referrals necessary (why can't I just walk in to a service)?

Like most healthcare services, mental health services often have large numbers of people looking for help and support and they need to develop systems to make sure they can help as many people as possible. The referral process makes sure that the people who can benefit from the service the most are the ones who have priority in accessing it. It also means a service can have some information about you before they start working with you, meaning you can get to the important stuff faster.

This does not mean you can only access mental health help and support if you are referred to a service. There are lots of places that offer instant access support face to face, over the phone or online if you find yourself needing something more immediate.

What can I do if I need help between being referred and waiting to see a service?

Waiting to start working with a service can be difficult, especially if you have a long time to wait or are struggling a lot at the moment. However, there are things you can try to help you whilst you wait.

Our self-care pages have lots of ideas and resources that you can use to support yourself through difficult times.

You can also search for other services that might be able to offer more immediate help and support through the Youth Wellbeing Directory or on our Urgent help page.

While you are waiting it is important that you check in regularly with a trusted adult who knows what is going on for you and who can help you if things get worse.

It is sometimes worth contacting the service you are waiting to see if you notice things getting worse, to let them know that the situation has changed. Different types of problems sometimes have different waiting times.

Will my parents/carers be told if I am referred to a service?

If you are over the age of 16, you can be referred to a service without your parents or guardian being told. However, if possible, we would recommend speaking to an adult that you trust if you are making decisions about a referral, as they can provide you with additional support.

If you are under 16, your parent or guardian will likely be involved in the referral process and have to give consent for a referral to be made.

You can find more information about parental consent and your other rights when it comes to mental health on our Know Your Rights page.

I have been referred, but haven't received a confirmation from the service. What should I do?

Were you expecting to receive something from them? If yes, then it might be best to get in touch. Remember – it can take a few days or more for a service to process your referral and send you a confirmation, so make sure you allow a reasonable amount of time (between 2 days and a week is a good rule unless they say otherwise). The service may have also contacted your referrer, so you can also try asking them if they can update you.

I have been referred to a service and had an assessment but they are not able to help me. What happens now?

Just because this particular service wasn't able to help doesn't mean there isn't another one that can. It is important to remember that the service will have considered your referral carefully before letting you know they are unable to help. It might be that they are just too full at the moment and think you need support faster than they can offer it, or that they don't provide the sort of help that might be best for you. Go back to your referrer and discuss other options with them. It will help if you have a record of why the service have said they can't help, even if it's just a few notes.

You can also do your own research for other services – the Youth Wellbeing Directory might be a good starting point.

Finding support:

Samaritans: 116 123 / www.samaritans.org
Childline: 0800 1111 / www.childline.org.uk
Youth Wellbeing Directory: youthwellbeing.co.uk

Details on how to find urgent help are available here (annafreud.org/urgenthelp).

About the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families:

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care for over 60 years.

Our aim is to transform current mental health provision in the UK by improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of treatment.

We believe that every child and their family should be at the heart of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals.

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