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## **Counseling Center no longer taking new patients for remainder of semester**

Before college, Kora Wilson didn't question her own mental health.

The junior journalism graphics major didn't stress academically and was "pretty normal." She was a 4.0 student. She was involved with extracurriculars, played two sports, volunteered and had a big friend group. She kept busy but wasn't worried.

That all changed her freshman year when she came to Ball State.

"The transition was not something I expected to be so drastic," Wilson said. "It shook me."

Wilson began to realize being "emo" in high school — along with how active she was — wasn't just a stage, but a distraction. There were actual problems she hadn't really thought about before.

She suffered from depression and anxiety. Overwhelmed with the transition and her mental health status, Wilson turned to Ball State's Counseling Center for help.

"It was very stiff and almost unfriendly," Wilson said. "I didn't feel satisfied or helped when going to talk to the counselor." And now, the Counseling Center has announced they will no longer be taking any new patients for the remainder of the semester, until January.

"We have filled all of the available new appointment slots for this semester and so we have no openings to take on new clients before the end of the semester," said Ellen Lucas, associate director of outreach consulting psychology for the Counseling Center in an email. "The freshman class is larger this year and the Counseling Center has seen a 14 percent increase in request for services over last year."

Currently, Ball State has over 21,000 undergraduates enrolled and only seven full-time therapists students can make appointments with.

The understaffed center has been an issue for the university as the student population and requests for services continues to grow.

"It felt like they were only trying to wind down the hour, instead of helping me find out why I felt the way I did," Wilson said. "And I had stated in the beginning I wasn't a fan of medication, but by the second session they were trying to put me on medicine. It just felt disconnected, not at all personal, and very off-putting."

Although she felt like the university had good intentions, Wilson said she felt like she was just another percentile because of the lack of staff within the Counseling Center.

According to the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), one in four students have a diagnosable illness. Fifty percent have been so anxious they struggled in school, and in 2013, 36.4 percent of college students said they experienced some level of depression, according to a survey conducted by the [Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors](#). Depression is also the No. 1 reason students drop out of school.

In late fall of 2015, Joan Todd, the university's spokesperson, told the Daily News the Counseling Center had been operating understaffed, but was in the process of hiring. Just earlier this year, Todd announced that the Counseling Center had filled all of their empty positions.

In addition to the seven full-time therapists, the Counseling Center also staffs one staff counselor, three full-time doctoral interns and 14 part-time graduate students.

While positions are filled, the demand for services are too high for the center to accommodate all the students seeking help, with exception to those who may be experiencing suicidal thoughts and may be identified as crisis cases.

The announcement of the Counseling Center no longer accepting new patients, has stirred mixed emotions.

"It is s—ty because we pay for a few sessions within our tuition," said Ricky Dunn, a freshman psychology major. "That is one of the few perks we get as students of Ball State and the fact that they want to say that they don't want to take new patients is like

the school just backstabbing us.

“I paid for those sessions and if I want to come in on some random day of the week because I just need to talk or actually need help, then I want to feel like I can. Not be told that they can't help because they aren't accepting any new patients. If there is a shortage of psychologists and psychiatrists, then they need to hire a few more or actually make a building for them. I mean, we have multiple gyms for athletic people. Why can't there be a few locations for people that need help?”

With finals coming up and **seasonal depression** becoming more prominent, Wilson was disappointed with the news.

“As someone who actually could really use the help of the resource of talking to a counselor/psychiatrist, it's frustrating and scary,” Wilson said. “Questioning my own mental health and being told I cannot see someone until January scares me. So after pushing and pushing and you finally as a person really think about how you are, it sucks when you realize mentally you aren't OK, but don't have the resources you were told you always had. If I'm paying for something, for this resource, I should have better access to it.”

With semester break just days away, students like Kaylee Kessling, a sophomore creative writing major, believes it's understandable and said “there's really just not time for them to take patients right now.”

“Intake and first appointment are typically done in different weeks, and even though the counseling the center provides is considered to be more short-term, intake and first appointment wouldn't help anything, honestly,” Kessling said. “While students who are patients are still 'kept' after the break, semester kind of provides a reset point.”

Kessling said she also believes people underestimate how many people the center serves.

“The structure that's used, with intake separate from first appointment, would make accepting new patients this close to the end of the year incredibly difficult, if not impossible,” she said.

There are sources off campus, however, including the **Center for Psychological Development**, located 2205 N. Wheeling Ave. In fact, after the Counseling Center stopped taking in new patients, **Sharon Ezop**, a licensed psychologist who works for the center, was contacted.

“Someone from there had called us and said that they worked there and they were full, [and they] wanted to see if we were accepting new clients,” Ezop said. “I told them yes and gave them some more information They were wanting to have our information so if they couldn't get somebody in, they could refer them to us.”

Even before the call, Ezop said the center, which staffs 10 therapists, serves Ball State students and staff. On average, Ezop said it takes one to two weeks to schedule an appointment with the center.

At the Counseling Center, the staff is scheduling a month out for a new appointment and current clients are typically seen every other week, Lucas said.

While Ezop said she believes not being able to have the resources at the university could be added on stress on top of those with mental health disorders, the university is doing well with providing students with some help, even if it's off campus.

Even though some may not be happy with the actions of the center, the reality is that universities are not legally bound or required to provide counseling services for students at all, said Jagdish Khubchandani, an associate professor of health science in the Department of Nutrition and Health Science.

“A majority of the college counseling centers in the U.S. maintain a right to deny treatment of a student if their mental health needs exceed the center's treatment resources,” Khubchandani said. “I am not sure about the latest happenings at Ball State, but universities nationwide are reconsidering their role and using strategies to manage caseloads and deal with funding and staffing challenges like using group therapy, limit the number of sessions, limit the time per session, using brief therapy, referring to external sources and utilizing doctoral students as counselors.”

Khubchandani said he believes colleges nationwide “need constant support from administration, innovative strategies to address our student needs, and continuous evaluation of the outcome of services provided.”

While she won't be getting help from the Counseling Center any time soon — and she doesn't want to since her first experience — Wilson is “steamrolling forward.”

“Luckily I'm the type of person who can keep going and distract themselves from thinking about the darker sides of my mental

health, but not everyone is good at that," Wilson said. "I know there are some students who can't do what I do — essentially distract yourself from the negative.

"Some of those students truly sincerely need that help, that voice," she said. "I hope for their sake that the university really looks at this and makes sure every student has the ability to talk to someone."