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OFFICE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Introduction and What to Expect in Counseling

Welcome to my counseling practice. The process of therapy is about talking through issues of concern to you that may be negatively impacting your well-being. My style is one of support and challenge, focusing on your past history and present circumstances to help you overcome emotional pain, develop self-acceptance and feel more empowered in your current life. We will work on finding and reframing negative beliefs about yourself and adopting healthier coping strategies to handle life's stressors. From this process you may feel emotions and grief more deeply for a while. As depression and anxiety are better managed and self-worth improves, you may notice you are reassessing choices you've been making about your health, relationships, job satisfaction, etc. and feel empowered to make some changes in these areas. Together we will choose how best to address your concerns, honor your readiness for change and respect the impact your choices will have on yourself and others in your life.

Client Rights and the Limits of Confidentiality

- I follow HIPAA regulations to safeguard client confidentiality. You will receive an email with the link to your rights under HIPAA with your *new patient paperwork* and at the start of a new calendar year. A HIPAA policy packet of patient rights and responsibilities can also be downloaded from my website or a paper copy can be mailed to you, if preferred.
- At your request, I will speak to or send your records, not including progress notes, to whomever you choose, such as a psychiatrist, if you sign a 'Release of Information'.
- Records that are requested to be sent to anyone other than a medical/mental health provider for coordination of care, will incur a fee for copying/compiling information.
- I am required by law to contact the appropriate authorities in the case of apparent child/elder abuse and in the case of clear and present danger that you are putting your life or the life of someone else at risk.
- Notes from this office can be subpoenaed by a court of law and I must comply.
- If you choose to use insurance, diagnostic updates may be requested by your insurance company as a requirement for reimbursement and continued treatment. Your insurer decides whether to allow treatment and for how long. When you sign an insurance claim form, you are signing a 'Release of Information' allowing me to file for reimbursement and allowing that company access to your mental health records.
- Should I seek peer consultation with another therapist, I will be discussing your case, but protecting identifying information.
- I may hire someone to help with insurance claims filing, bookkeeping and filing taxes. They may see information such as name, address, birthdate, diagnosis code, fees and dates of service, as required by your insurer. However, my progress notes on our sessions are kept separately and remain confidential.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed for electronic communication, such as emails sent between us, or other technology such as that used for insurance claims filing or credit/debit card transactions.
- Your signatures at the end of this handout acknowledge and accept the limits of confidentiality. These circumstances will be reviewed at intake and can be discussed with me at any time.
- You may direct complaints about Licensed Professional Counselors to the Texas state licensing board at 800-821-3205.

Individual, Couples, Group and Telephone Counseling

Individual counseling consists of meeting for a 40-55 minute session either weekly or every other week, depending on your needs and our schedules. For those in crisis, sessions can be scheduled more frequently. For **couples counseling**, I will likely see each partner individually from time to time, if needed. If I have already been seeing one partner for individual counseling, and couples counseling is requested, I require the new partner to have two individual sessions first to begin to establish a therapeutic relationship with me or to determine if it in your/their best interest to work with another therapist. A couples session will last for 45-55 minutes or if requested in advance, for 90-110 minutes (double session)when additional time is needed to work on an issue. A double session involves a double payment. For **groups**, at least one individual pre-screening session is required. **Telephone counseling** is offered only to those who are already established clients at my standard fee under the following circumstances: covid/pandemic, if someone is ill, injured/recovering from surgery, in crisis, and we are unable to meet in- person or via video-telehealth. Insurance companies do not reimburse for telephone sessions. However, some allowances are being made during the covid pandemic. If in doubt, contact your insurer.

Communications Policy

Since confidentiality cannot be guaranteed when using the internet, I don't provide any counseling via email, texting or social media. Please do not send any filled out forms, insurance cards, etc. with personal information via standard email. **I have a special email account available with a company called Hushmail for this purpose: micki@mickiobrienlpc-s.hush.com. It requires you to create a passphrase which you will need to save for future use.** With your permission, however, I will schedule sessions, reschedule cancellations and send reading suggestions or handouts through standard email. if you prefer. I don't text or connect through social media with clients.

Payments and Insurance Reimbursements

Please bring or send via hush mail a copy of your driver's license/picture ID, and if using, your insurance card for our first meeting. Your payment or co-pay is due at each session and I accept checks, cash (in-person sessions), major credit/debit or HSA cards (3.5% processing fee). When you are self-paying, I will provide you with a "Super Bill" to file an out-of-network insurance claim, to use for an HSA reimbursement, or for tax purposes.
If you are planning to use health insurance for which I am a provider, please print out the Health Insurance Claim form in the 'forms' section of my website or use the one I have sent to you. Fill out the top one-half and sign in the two places indicated about halfway down the page; **send via hush mail** prior to your first counseling session. Contact your insurer before the first visit to obtain: pre-authorization number if required, co-pay information, number of sessions allowed and the deductible you need to meet. When you have a co-insurance plan and/or are meeting a deductible, your payment to me can vary depending on the length of the session, whether it is a first session and other variables. Some insurance plans use separate subcontracting companies for mental health coverage who may have additional restrictions or separate in-network providers, so please verify my provider status with the company that is handling your mental health coverage. You are responsible for paying for any sessions that your insurer does not cover.
Therapy groups require payment for each scheduled session (even if you know in advance that you will miss one) in order to retain your place. Groups and workshops are self-pay.

Paperwork requests If you are requesting me to fill out forms or write letters for disability applications, FMLA, school reinstatement, legal issues, etc., or asking for summaries of case notes to be prepared and sent to an attorney, we can review your needs and the fees for the service at that time. If you need/will need a therapist for a court appearance, it would be best to choose someone else as your therapist who specializes in working with the legal system. I do not make court appearances.
I do not sign paperwork for emotional support pets.

Appointments and Cancellations

Each time we meet, we can set up your next appointment or you can call or email me to arrange a session. If you cannot make a scheduled appointment, please contact me as soon as possible. I reserve that time especially for you and have a 24 -hour notification policy. **The fee for all no-shows, forgets and cancellations that are less than 24 -hours is $85. If you have multiple no-shows, cancels, etc., my full fee will be charged and we can discuss your circumstances.**

If you are running late for an appointment, please call (512)494-9294 or send me an email to let me know you are on your way.

Upon Arriving for an In-Person Counseling Session

My office is built onto the back of my home. While the street address is Glenview Ave., the office is actually located **around the corner on Mohle Drive**. You may park in the driveway or anywhere along the side of my house. Please avoid parking in front of other houses on the street. Before you enter my office, look for the sign in the window of the black entry door. Since I do not have a waiting room, I use a **green sign to indicate 'come in'** and a **red sign to indicate 'do not disturb'**. If there is no sign, it means I am not there yet. Once the green sign is up, you may come in. I try to be very timely with all sessions so there is little waiting. There is a restroom for your convenience.

If you arrive early for a session, please wait in your car until the green sign is up, and if I am able to, I will start and end our session early. If I am not there 5 or 6 minutes after our session was supposed to start, call **512-913-5215** just in case we have gotten our signals crossed. This phone number is only to be used in this instance or if there is an emergency. Otherwise please use the office phone number **512-494-9294.**
Many clients arrive by bicycle, scooter and walking or may come directly from a workout session. This is great, and you are welcome, but please deodorize and towel off before entering the office, if needed.

Telehealth Counseling
Telehealth counseling has become the norm during the pandemic and it is too early to predict when I will provide in-person counseling again. Telehealth requires a separate consent form which educates in more detail about confidentiality and privacy laws specific to mental health via video or phone contact. The client is required to be alone in a space that is private and in which our conversation can not be seen or overheard. A client cannot be out walking or managing other activities during a telehealth counseling session. Always check with your insurer about their allowance for telehealth if you plan to file a claim.

Ending Counseling
You may end counseling at any time and it can be very helpful to have a termination session to wrap up our time together. Oftentimes, after clients have finished with ongoing sessions, they may come in for intermittent check-ins. While you are welcome to do this, if two months have passed without contact, your case file will be closed and I will no longer legally be considered the 'Counselor of Record'. However, you are welcome to contact me at any time to restart our sessions, and if I have schedule availability, I will reopen your case file.

Records Maintenance
I am required by law to maintain my records for 5 years from the last date of your attendance. In the case of children under 18, I must maintain the records for 5 years beyond the time they turn 18. After that time period, I destroy old records for the protection of your confidentiality.

Credentials, Therapy Style and Expertise/Interests
I have been in private practice in Austin either full-time or part-time for over thirty-five years. I have a Master's degree in Guidance and Counseling Psychology from the University of Texas at Austin, additional graduate hours from the State University of New York at Brockport and am licensed by the State of Texas as a Professional Counselor and Counselor Supervisor (LPC-S). In the past, I was employed as a counselor for the University of Texas' Counseling and Psychological Services Center, providing individual, couples and group therapy, as well as outreach programs and workshops. In addition I was on staff of the University's Telephone Counseling and Referral Hotline providing crisis and suicide intervention and counseling resources. When I left U.T., I became the director of The Women's Counseling and Resource Center of the Greater Austin Area YWCA for several years, where we provided crisis intervention, topic-oriented groups and counseling for individuals and couples. My therapy style makes use of cognitive-behavioral, mindfulness and relational theories. I am EMDR trained and also have training in hypnosis. I enjoy working with individual women and men, as well as couples and groups.

Areas of expertise and interest
EMDR for recovery from trauma and painful experiences; Loss/grief and life transitions; Assertiveness, Autonomy and Empowerment; Hypnosis/relaxation to aid well-being and reduce stress, anxiety, stop smoking and more; Pregnancy, childbirth preparation and postpartum support; Parenting; Eating disorders; Relationships; Young adult development (20's and 30's); Mid-life concerns; Coping with aging parents; Issues for survivors of dysfunctional family systems relating to: divorce, abuse, neglect, trauma, drug/alcohol addiction, mental illness, death or the suicide of a loved one.

2021-22 Signed Consents and Acknowledgement of the Limits of Confidentiality

Your signature below indicates a **"Consent to Treatment"** and that you have received my handout **'Office Policies and Procedures'** which outlines: Introduction and what to expect in therapy; Confidentiality rights and limits; Appointments and cancellations; Payment and insurance; No-show and late fees; My guidelines for individual, couples, group & telephone counseling; Upon arriving for an in-person counseling session; Tele-health Counseling Requirements; Communication Policy; Paperwork requests; Ending counseling and the 'Counselor of Record' time frame; Records Maintenance; My credentials, style and areas of expertise. You have received "Your HIPAA Privacy Rights" information from me along with your intake paperwork.

Printed Name____

Signature____ Date________________

Email

Your signature below is permission for me to be in contact with you via email for scheduling purposes and sending information, such as handouts and reading suggestions. You understand that email is an electronic transfer of information and privacy cannot be guaranteed. I ask that you do not send protected health information (ie; insurance cards, filled out intake forms) to me unless it is through my **Hushmail** account. Should you choose to use standard email anyway, you are responsible for the decision. If you choose to send me information about personal problems, please understand that I do not counsel clients via email.

Signature ____ Date_________________

Credit/Debit/HSA Card Payment

Your signature below is permission for me to use a credit/debit /HSA card processor to receive payment from you and acknowledges the limitations of confidentiality with any such method. Processing fees of 3.5% apply.

Signature____ Date__________________

Insurance Claims Filing

If I am filing an insurance claim on your behalf, your signature below is permission for me to send the required identifiable information to them and to receive their reimbursement.

Signature____ Date __________________

You may return this signed consent page to me by:

1-special email only: **micki@mickiobrienlpc-s.hush.com**

2-Printing it from my website, signing it and bringing it to an in-person session

3-Signing a pre-printed copy in my office

4-Snail mailing it to the address below

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