

Alberta Doctors' Digest

All about the Physician and Family Support Program Assistance Line

Physicians face unique professional challenges that can lead to exhaustion, self-doubt, burnout. After a long day, it's natural to reflect on the emotional and mental toll of your work. Reaching out for support can be difficult, especially when your experiences are complex and not easily understood by those outside the profession.

What if there was a number you could call, any time, to talk to someone who understands the culture of medicine, the cognitive load, the relentless urgency, and the complexity of caring for other people's health while maintaining your own? The AMA's Physician and Family Support Program (PFSP) Assistance Line exists for precisely these moments, offering confidential support from professionals and physician peers who understand your reality.

If you need to talk to someone now, here is the number: 1-877-767-4637. Otherwise, continue reading to learn more.

What is the PFSP?

The PFSP offers confidential, 24/7/365 peer support to physicians, medical learners and resident physicians as well as their immediate family members – through a personalized approach that connects callers to trained professionals and a province-wide network of therapists. The program emphasizes strict confidentiality, best-fit therapist matching and continuity of care. Physicians, medical students and resident physicians are eligible for six hours of counselling within a 12-month period. Immediate family members (see definition in our FAQ below) share six hours within a 12-month period.

The PFSP is delivered by the AMA and funded through a grant from the Government of Alberta. It is exclusively available as an AMA member benefit. The Assistance Line is supported by unify consulting group, a Calgary-based employee assistance program specializing in mental health and organizational wellness.

Meet the partner behind the line: unify consulting group

We spoke with Fleur Yumol, founder and CEO of unify consulting group, the team that operates the PFSP Assistance Line. Fleur is a trained clinical social worker with about 25 years of experience. Her unify team coordinates the assistance line's assessment, triage and therapist matching — bringing clinical rigour and deep familiarity with the culture of medicine.

“Our main objective is to remove barriers that prevent physicians, medical students, resident physicians and their immediate family members from accessing services that they need, whether it's a crisis situation or an ongoing issue,” Fleur says.

Not a call centre

When you call into the assistance line, you can rest assured that every call will be answered by intake and assessment coordinators with degrees in social work or psychology. They are trained to conduct risk assessments, provide compassionate support in the moment and make best-fit referrals.

“We’re not a call centre. We meet you with an empathetic ear and ensure your concerns are understood, supported and connected to the right therapist,” Fleur explains.

Physician peer support, 24/7/365

One of the most valued features of the program is physician-to-physician peer support. Callers can speak with an assessment physician – a colleague who understands your world, validates what you’re feeling and helps you strategize a path forward.

“There’s nothing more validating than speaking to a physician who’s been through something similar,” Fleur shares. Your story and your emotions are unique, but through the assistance line, you’re getting support from someone who truly knows where you’re coming from.

A therapist network that understands medicine

Therapists in the unify network hold master’s-level training, specialize in disciplines such as psychology, social work and counselling psychology and have at least four years’ post-master’s experience. They carry appropriate liability insurance and, most importantly, understand the culture of medicine.

“Physicians tell us they appreciate not having to explain everything about medicine – the therapists just get it. Vetting therapists who have experience working with physicians is critical for us,” Fleur says.

Reasons behind the call

The assistance line receives calls for concerns across the spectrum: depression, anxiety, grief, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, relationship and family issues (couples counselling, coping with aging parents, dealing with adult children) and learning issues. PFSP also supports psycho-educational assessments for children and learners, and it accepts third-party calls from people concerned about a physician’s well being.

“Things don’t have to be critical before you call. We really embrace the proactive nature of it – even if it feels like it’s not a big deal yet, it can be a slippery slope. Proactive support can prevent that,” Fleur notes.

Barriers to seeking help

Fleur observes, “Physicians are often put on a pedestal, expected to wear the cape and be the hero without ever showing vulnerability. The moment there’s a crack in the armour; many feel they’ve failed or were never meant to do this. Imposter syndrome is real, and the pressure can be overwhelming.”

The PFSP is designed to break down these barriers, making it easier for physicians to ask for help and access support – whether for a crisis or simply to stay well.

What you can expect when you call

1) You’ll be greeted by a trained professional

You’ll provide your name and basic demographic/contact information so a secure confidential client ID can be created. If there are safety concerns, risk is assessed and support is provided immediately.

2) A physician peer listens first

Next, you’ll be offered to speak with an assessment physician via telephone at a time and place where you can talk freely. Designed to be a safe, empathetic space to share your story, together you’ll explore what’s happening and what you need. This helps unify make the best fit therapist match.

3) Matching to a therapist in your area

unify coordinates your referral to a local therapist. The therapist bills unify directly for your covered sessions.

4) Continuity of care

If you’ve built rapport, you can continue with the same therapist beyond your covered hours. If a match doesn’t feel right, re-referral is easy and supported. If you are seeing someone privately already and they’re not yet in the network, unify will do their best to onboard your therapist (subject to credentialing and the therapist agreeing to unify’s requirements) so you can continue your therapeutic relationship with the support of the PFSP.

How PFSP safeguards confidentiality and improves services

unify collects anonymous, aggregated data linked to confidential client IDs (never to names, personal or professional identifiers). They provide statistical analysis and recommendations to PFSP – always confidentially – to identify trends and enhance wellness services for AMA members.

“We assign a confidential client ID to each caller. All data is aggregated and anonymized – never attached to your name or professional details. This allows the PFSP to report trends and make recommendations to AMA, always with your privacy protected,” Fleur assures.

FAQ: Quick answers to common questions

When can I call?

Anytime — 24/7/365. Call 1 877 767 4637.

What if I know the assessment physician on call?

You never have to share your story with someone you know. There are two assessment physicians on call; if you know one, you can speak to the other. In the rare case you know both, the PFSP's clinical and program co-directors (also physicians) are available.

Do you provide referrals to family physicians?

Yes – PFSP can connect you to family physicians through the [Physicians for Physicians \(P4P\) program](#).

How many therapy hours am I entitled to each year?

Physicians, medical students and resident physicians are eligible for six hours of counselling within a 12-month period. Immediate family members (see definition below) share six hours within a 12-month period.

Can I renew therapy hours?

Yes. Therapy hours are renewable after 12 months. Call the assistance line to renew and either resume with your previous therapist or choose someone new.

How does the PFSP define immediate family or dependents?

A spouse or common-law spouse (cohabitating for at least one year) and dependent children under age 25.

Can someone call on behalf of a physician?

Yes. The PFSP accepts third-party calls from people concerned about a physician's well being, whether family or colleagues.

A personal message from Fleur

"I've been part of PFSP throughout my career, first as a therapist and now administering the program. My passion is removing barriers so physicians can get the help they need. It's never too early or too late to call us. We count on you to be well, and we're here to help you be well."

Call now – anytime

PFSP Assistance Line: 1 877 767 4637

[PFSP website](#)

Banner image credit: Marvin Polis