

## VOLUNTARY MEDICAL LEAVE FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ISSUES

**PURPOSE:** To define the process for a voluntary medical leave, as well as the procedure for returning the student to Mercyhurst University following such an absence.

**POLICY:** Mercyhurst University may permit a student to take an approved, voluntary medical leave when a student:

- cannot adequately protect his or her safety on campus; and/or
- experiences psychiatric symptoms that significantly disrupt daily life functioning, often including class attendance and progress; and/or
- experiences symptoms which significantly disrupt the rights and safety of others on campus

Typically, leave is granted when these symptoms fail to respond adequately to outpatient counseling assistance on campus; or are so acute at the time the student presents to the Counseling Center that an immediate leave is appropriate.

The recommendation for medical leave for psychiatric issues must come from a licensed mental health provider or licensed physician following an evaluation of the client. Typically, the decision will be made on campus by a licensed provider at the Mercyhurst University Counseling Center, and approved by the Director of the Counseling Center. In some instances, the recommendation may come from the student's provider(s) at home or in the community. That recommendation will be reviewed by the Director of the Counseling Center.

The request for medical leave may initiate with the Counseling Center and be directed to the Office of Academic Affairs (OAA), or, in the case of a referral from a community provider, may first be received by OAA. In any event, the leave request and medical documentation supporting it must be reviewed by the Director of the Counseling Center. The student will need to sign a release of information between the provider and the Counseling Center to allow gathering of any additional information needed to make the internal recommendation for medical leave. The Counseling Center Director will then forward a recommendation regarding medical leave to the Vice President of Academic Affairs, or that individual's designee, who makes the final decision regarding approval of the request.

If approved for medical leave, the student's transcript will show that the student withdrew from classes, the GPA is not affected, and the psychiatric nature of the leave is not displayed. Refunds of tuition and/or housing dollars are dependent on the date the leave is initiated and follow the timelines published in the student catalogue for refunds. The one exception to this is if the medical leave is granted for a catastrophic illness or injury in which case the full tuition and housing fees for the term are refunded to the student. In this instance, the date of the leave is backdated to the start of the term to permit this refund. This "backdating" may only occur with the permission of the Vice President of Enrollment. If a student requires more than two medical leaves for psychiatric issues within a twelve-

month period, the student will typically be required to remain on leave for a twelve-month period to assure an ability to return to and maintain a stabilized level of functioning.

Students on medical leave will not be permitted to register for classes until a return from leave has been approved. This is accomplished by OAA placing a medical hold on the student's account. A student taking medical leave for psychiatric issues will be required to demonstrate that they have pursued active treatment while on leave, made progress, and have the support of their community provider for a return to campus. The Director of the Counseling Center or designee will talk with the provider and the student before making the final recommendation as to whether the student returns to campus. However, the recommendation of the treating provider alone does not guarantee an immediate return from leave. A recommendation for a return from leave may be contingent on a student's willingness to continue counseling or other treatment for a period of time upon a return. In other instances, a return to campus may be dependent on approval of reasonable accommodations on campus. If accommodations are requested, they will be reviewed by the Counseling Center and Learning Differences Office and an accommodation plan developed by the latter and communicated to faculty when the student is reinstated. The Counseling Center will forward a recommendation for medical leave to the Vice President of OAA for approval. If approved, the hold is removed from the student's account to clear the way for registration for classes.

## **PROCEDURE**

### **REFERRAL AND EVALUATION**

#### **Mercyhurst University Counseling Center:**

1. Students experiencing psychiatric distress should be referred to the Counseling Center, or in an emergency situation, campus police should be contacted. In the event that multiple problems exist, and the student is unlikely to go to the Counseling Center, staff or faculty may instead refer the student to the Students of Concern Committee (SOC). A student in immediate risk of harming self or others requires campus police and safety to be notified first before calling other campus supports.
2. Counseling Center staff is alert to symptoms and patterns of behavior that suggest a voluntary medical leave might be appropriate to pursue. If a referral source is concerned that a leave might be appropriate, the referral source can contact the Center to relay this information. While a student may be aware that a leave is an option through their perusal of the student handbook, or discussion with others, it is important that students know that the recommendation for a leave can only result from an evaluation with appropriate mental health/medical personnel. The simple presence of a psychiatric diagnosis does not entitle or require a leave. In many instances, other strategies can be implemented that help the student stay on campus. Rather, the granting of a leave is based on the degree of disruption stemming from symptoms, presence of safety concerns, and the likelihood that other intervention efforts can be tried on campus with a reasonable degree of success.

3. An evaluation of the need for leave will include diagnostic and psychosocial interviewing of the client, a history of presenting symptoms, and a review of other treatment strategies. The clinician providing the evaluation may request additional information from others on campus, prior treatment providers, or family members as appropriate provided the student is willing to sign a written release for such information. In some instances, the evaluation may require more than one session before a determination about leave is made.
4. Clinical options that can be utilized when student distress is heightened, and a leave is either not yet indicated, or the student is refusing a leave, include:
  - Increase the number of clinical sessions per week
  - Encourage the student to contact the on-call counselor off-hours through the on-call system as appropriate.
  - Expedite an appointment with Cohen Health Center physicians or consulting psychiatrist to examine medication options
  - Encourage student to meet with advisor, professors or Academic Support, to assist with academic progress
  - Utilize community resources if needed and appropriate
  - Contact parents as permitted by students and encourage family collaboration to assist the student
5. If a student presents as an immediate, significant safety risk for self and others at the time of evaluation, that student will be encouraged to complete an immediate, voluntary psychiatric evaluation at an area hospital. Similarly, if the student meets the criteria for an involuntary evaluation at an area hospital, that option may be pursued before a leave determination is made.

**Community Provider:**

1. In some instances, a student may pursue treatment for psychiatric issues at home or out in the community. That provider, based on the clinical presentation of the student, may recommend a medical leave. The student often contacts the Office of Academic Affairs with this information. OAA will make the Director of the Counseling Center aware of the request, and the Center can send a letter about medical leave to the student that includes information to be given to the provider. This information will act as a guide that assists the provider in writing a summary of their evaluation with the student, the findings, the reason for the leave, and the treatment recommendations. The student will sign a release form permitting the Counseling Center director or designee to talk directly with the provider and/or student as necessary.
2. The Director of the Counseling Center will contact the Assistant Vice President for Academic Services upon receipt of the necessary clinical information. The Counseling Center will clarify information with the provider as needed, and assure that the provider understands the process for a return from leave. The Counseling Center will then forward that letter to the Assistant Vice President with a notation that a review has been completed. In the event that the clinical

information or basis of evaluation appears inadequate, or the provider making the recommendations does not appear to meet the qualifications noted in this policy, the Counseling Center can recommend additional evaluation if necessary.

3. The position of the Counseling Center in these instances is to assure that providers are aware of the criteria the college uses for medical leave recommendations and returns from medical leaves, and that the qualifications of the provider and nature of evaluation appears consistent with these policies. The Counseling Center cannot judge the validity of the information, as the Center is not the party completing the evaluation, and in many instances, will never have seen the student. However, if the information received from the licensed provider is consistent with campus criteria for a medical leave, the Center will recommend that to OAA.
4. Once the information has been reviewed by the Counseling Center and appears in line with policy, the office of Academic Affairs can take action to approve the leave and notify the student.

### **MEDICAL LEAVE RECOMMENDED AND ACCEPTED**

1. If a medical leave is recommended and accepted by the student, and the student is on campus and involved with the Counseling Center, the student will be asked to sign a release of information permitting the Counseling Center to contact Residence Life/Student Life and the Office of Academic Affairs. The student will be encouraged to contact the parent(s) at the time of the session to assure communication, and answer parent questions about leave. The student may be asked to sign a release of information between the Counseling Center and the parent.
2. The counselor will alert the Resident Life Assistant Director that a medical leave is being pursued, and will provide information about when the student will be leaving. If there are safety concerns, the counselor and the Residence Life Assistant Director will work with the student to develop a plan so that the student is with others and/or under appropriate supervision prior to parent arrival. The student will be encouraged to contact their Resident Assistant to make arrangements about departure and the key. The counselor will encourage the student to think through what the student will tell peers about the campus departure.
3. The counselor will let the student know that generally the student's current housing arrangement is not maintained once a leave is implemented. However, if the student is certain about returning to Mercyhurst, and the living environment is one that is positive for the student, the student can ask Residence Life to retain their spot in the room during the leave, and Residence Life will review this request and communicate a decision to the student.
4. The counselor will alert OAA of the leave, and will generally forward the official written recommendation within 24-48 hours of the recommendation/decision being made. This letter includes a brief summary of evaluation findings, the recommendation for leave, five-axis diagnosis, and any other pertinent information. OAA will maintain this information confidentially in a locked file.
5. OAA will send an email notifying the student's faculty that the student is taking a medical leave. This communication will not include any information regarding the reason for such a leave beyond the fact that it is medical.

6. While the counselor will discuss the medical leave and return from leave policy with the student and, as possible, with the parent, it is understood that taking leave of campus is often an emotional time and this information may not be well retained. A follow-up letter will be sent by OAA that goes back over this information, and the Counseling Center Director will remain available to the family for questions or concerns.

#### **MEDICAL LEAVE RECOMMENDED, BUT STUDENT DECLINES**

1. If a student appears to require a medical leave, but refuses one, counseling staff and director will review the situation to determine if any criteria for an involuntary medical leave are present. If so, staff will proceed accordingly. If not, staff will work to keep an active treatment relationship with the student and will utilize other campus supports as possible, revisiting the issue of a voluntary leave as indicated.

#### **MEDICAL LEAVE REQUESTED, BUT EVALUATION RESULTS DO NOT SUPPORT**

1. The Counseling Center clinician will explain to the student the reason that the leave has been declined. In any instance where the student feels a voluntary medical leave is warranted, and the evaluation results do not support this, the clinician will review the decision with the Counseling Center director who reserves the right to gather additional data as necessary in reaching a final decision.
2. If the leave is not granted, generally a treatment plan of action will be recommended and implemented, and the student's progress closely monitored to continue to assess the need for a leave.
3. In general, the Counseling Center will not approve leaves sought at the very end of the term, particularly by a student with no prior contact during the term with a mental health provider, or with no substantiation of symptoms.
4. If a student does not qualify for a voluntary medical leave, the student may still qualify for a different type of leave, and the student will be referred to the Office of Academic Affairs for more information.

#### **RETURN FROM MEDICAL LEAVE**

1. A student desiring to return from medical leave should contact the Counseling Center 3-4 weeks before the beginning of the term the student wishes to attend.
2. The Director, or designee, will arrange to receive written notification from the treatment provider documenting the amount and type of treatment, attendance, progress, and the provider's opinion of the student's ability to return to a campus setting. The Director may also speak directly with the provider. While the opinion of the treating provider about the student's ability to function successfully on campus is important, that opinion must also be tempered by the Counseling Center's knowledge of the skills required for campus living and the student's

history. Therefore, the final clinical clearance for return to school must come from the Counseling Center.

3. The Director, or designee, will speak with the student by phone or in-person, and may require a re-evaluation session prior to making a determination about a return from leave. The student's ability to work or attend part-time classes successfully while on leave will be a positive factor in the re-evaluation process. A student may be cleared to return to school without conditions, returned to school with conditions (i.e. with the requirement that treatment continue for a period of time upon return), or the return to school may be declined. In the latter instance, the reason for the decline will be clarified and the student directed to what further treatment or activities will assist the student in returning the following term.
4. The Counseling Center will notify OAA about whether the student has been clinically cleared for return, and any additional recommendations. These individuals will assist and direct the student to assure that registration, financial aid, and housing issues for return are addressed.

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