

Directorate: Counselling and Career Development

Online counselling sessions for Unisa students

Unisa student counsellors are available to help you address career, academic, and personal issues that affect your study success. We offer a free and confidential service to students. Unisa staff can access the Employee Assistance Programme.

You can have discussions with counsellors [by e-mail](#) as well as appointments via Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams is a communication tool that can be used to chat using video, audio, and text.

You can self-refer to our counselling services, meaning that if you need to discuss aspects that are affecting your studies, you can contact us directly to discuss your needs. Sometimes one discussion is enough, but should you have more complex needs, longer-term counselling can be discussed with the student counsellor. During the initial discussion, the counsellor will work with you to understand your current situation and concerns. Together, you and the counsellor will then decide on the arrangement of further sessions. Most likely, the counsellor will also discuss with you the self-help materials which you might access to complement the work we do with you. As part of this process, we would also consider whether the online sessions will best suit your needs at this time and how best to access appropriate support.

We also have a wide range of self-help information available on our website covering issues including career management, study skills, managing challenges more effectively, relationship problems, and bereavement and grief.

Visit our website at
www.unisa.ac.za/counselling



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Students in crisis

Please be aware that this is not an emergency service. We are unable to provide online counselling if you are feeling actively suicidal, engaging in serious self-harming behaviours or if you have severe or enduring mental health problems. In the event of an emergency arising or if you were experiencing suicidal thoughts, your counsellor would discuss with you the appropriate support that you could access during this period.

If you found yourself in a major crisis and were considering serious self-harm, it would be vital to get immediate help. In the event of an emergency or if you are in a crisis, you may call:

- Your GP (general practitioner)
- Higher Health 24-hour helpline: Toll-free call 0800 36 36 36 or SMS 43336
- [Lifeline](tel:0861322322): 0861 322 322
- [SADAG](tel:0800567567): 0800 567 567
- 24-hour helpline on 0800 456 789;
- [Gender-Based Violence Command Centre \(GBVCC\)](tel:0800428428) helpline: 0800 428 428
- ER24 in a medical emergency: 084 124.

Benefits and limitations of online counselling

Online Counselling takes place via electronic communications, using online platforms (i.e. email, telephone, or video calls), where a client is in session/consultation with the student counsellor, both in a different location, during office hours.

Benefits of Online Counselling

- Access to counselling and therapy regardless of geographical location.
- Access to counselling in unexpected and unpredictable circumstances.
- Scheduled at a time that suits both the client and counsellor.
- Extends support to clients in areas where no/limited support is available.

Limitations of Online Counselling

The session does not follow the traditional social interactions which face-to-face interactions would offer. This style of counselling is not recommended for certain cases and thus seeing a Mental Health professional face-to-face is recommended if:

- You are in a crisis.
- Your personal safety is an issue, you are currently suicidal or contemplating suicide.
- You require specialist medical treatment; and/or require admission to a Health Care Facility.
- You feel overwhelmed by strong emotions and unable to manage them on your own.
- You have recently been a victim of violence or have been violent to a partner/friend.
- You do not have the means to provide yourself with a safe, secure, and private space.
- You are limited in the use of technology (data/device capability/skill).

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Make an appointment

- [Click here](#) to go to the online booking form and book an online session:
- You will receive a confirmation e-mail after making your booking as well as a reminder e-mail one day before your booking. At the time of your appointment, click on the link in the confirmation e-mail you received to join the MS Teams meeting to meet with the counsellor. You will be able to connect to the session with sound and video.
- All Unisa students have access to Microsoft Teams and to use this service, you will need to download the app to your smartphone, tablet, or laptop/PC and sign in using your Unisa login details. Alternatively, you can also access Microsoft Teams via a web browser.
- After your counselling session, you will be sent an email with a link to an anonymous survey. Completing this survey will help us gain a better understanding of your online counselling experience and will enable us to make service adjustments to better meet student needs.

Making the most of your online counselling session(s)

- To fully benefit from the process, think in advance about the problem(s) you are experiencing right now. Maybe look again, before the initial online assessment appointment, at the pre-intake form, so that you can think about your answers: what would you like to bring to counselling and how can this online session (and possible subsequent sessions) work best for you? Give some thought to whether you would feel more comfortable using video or only audio. Online counselling sessions, like face to face sessions, offer a space to explore your concerns further and gain a greater understanding of yourself and your situation. This is likely to involve you in considering how you might want to change things for and in yourself, as well as some external changes in your life that you might want to make. The sessions might well involve thinking about what other support you might need to access alongside or after the online sessions.

Confidentiality

- We aim to provide a secure and confidential online service and take reasonable steps to protect your privacy.
- Online Counselling may not take place without the informed consent of the student. You will provide consent when you complete the online booking form.
- Please note that recording of the counselling appointment is not permitted when connecting to Microsoft Teams by either the Counsellor or the student. If recording is engaged, then either party can ask for the recording to be stopped and if necessary, terminate the counselling appointment accordingly.
- During and after the session, the student counsellor will make notes of what was discussed (process notes) and these notes will be securely stored for six years as required by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA).
- Please provide the contact details of a family member or friend who can be contacted in case of emergency, as guided by the limitations of confidentiality.
- The content of your sessions will not be communicated to any third party except for the purposes of supervision of the counsellor's work. Your information will remain anonymous.

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- We would seek to maintain the confidentiality of all communications online, as we do when working face to face with people at the service. Both in online and face to face counselling relationships confidentiality will only be breached in the following instances:
 - If you demonstrate suicidal ideation or demonstrate any intent to harm yourself.
 - If you indicate an intention to harm others.
 - If there is any indication of Child Abuse as stipulated in the Child Care Act No. 38 of 2005 (when dealing with minors) or if the student counsellor is subpoenaed by a Court of Law.
 - If at any point during the counselling you need emergency support, you may be asked for your consent to contact a family member, your GP or another medical professional, and/or referred to alternative avenues of support other than online counselling.
 - To protect the confidential nature and the boundaries of the counselling relationship, your counsellor will not accept any invitations to join your social networks, even after the counselling has ended.

Your responsibility for security

- There is an increased risk of breach of information if the device is not protected; take precautions to ensure confidentiality on your devices/apps. Privacy in any form of communication over the internet cannot be 100% guaranteed since we have limited control over your actions or the actions of others.
- Never share your login passwords with anyone else.
- If using a shared device, sign out of your Unisa account if you are not using the device.
- If applicable, always password-protect your Wi-Fi connection.
- If you suspect that your password has been compromised, get it changed immediately.
- Ensure that you are in a space away from others to prevent disruptions. Please notify the student counsellor should these occur. It can be helpful, for the duration of the counselling appointment, to switch on the “blurring the background” facility available on Microsoft Teams as this can minimise distractions during the counselling appointment.
- Do not share any information on the internet or anywhere else about your counselling communications.
- If for any reason Microsoft Teams is not working and the session cannot take place, there should be email communication between you and your student counsellor to explain the situation and re-arrange the session or make alternative arrangements.
- If you do have serious concerns about online security and feel that you cannot agree to these conditions, then online counselling as offered may not be the best option for you. If this is the case, do contact us at counselling@unisa.ac.za so that we can find a way to discuss alternative options.

Contact us

- Contact us by e-mail to counselling@unisa.ac.za if you do have any further questions or concerns about the online provision and how it works. The contact details for the counselling and career development services at the Unisa regional centres is available [here](#).