

Privacy of Information Shared in Therapy: Adolescent Rights and My Policies

What to expect in therapy

The purpose of meeting with a therapist is to get help with problems in your life that are bothering you or that are keeping you from being successful in important areas. You may have requested to talk with a therapist; or you may be here because your parent, guardian, doctor, or teacher is concerned about you. When we discuss these problems, it is important that you feel comfortable and that you are honest with me. We will probably talk about some things that you don't want your parents or guardians to know. For most people, knowing that what they say will be kept private helps them feel more comfortable and have more trust in their therapist. Privacy, also called confidentiality, is an important and necessary part of good counseling.

As a general rule, I will keep the information you share with me in our sessions confidential unless I have your written consent to disclose certain information. There are, however, important exceptions to this rule that are important for you to understand before you share personal information with me in a therapy session. In some situations, I am required by law or by the guidelines of my profession to disclose information whether or not I have your permission. I have listed some of these situations below.

Confidentiality cannot be maintained in the following situations:

- If you tell me you plan to cause serious harm or death to yourself, and I believe you have the intent and ability to carry out this threat in the near future. I am required to inform a parent or guardian of how serious I believe this threat to be. I must make sure that you are protected from harming yourself.
- If you tell me you plan to cause serious harm or death to someone else who can be identified, and I believe you have the intent and ability to carry out this threat in the near future. In this situation, I must inform your parent or guardian, and I must inform the person whom you intend to harm.
- If you are doing things that could cause serious harm to you or to someone else even if you do not intend to harm yourself or another person. In these situations, I will need to use my professional judgment to decide whether a parent or guardian should be informed.
- If you tell me you are being abused (physically, sexually or emotionally) or that you have been abused in the past. I am required by law to report the abuse to the Virginia Department of Social Services.
- If you are involved in a court case and a request is made for information about your counseling or therapy. If this happens, I will do all I can within the law to protect your confidentiality and to not disclose information without your written agreement. A judge, however, can require me to disclose information to the court even without your consent. If I am required to disclose information to the court, I will inform you that this is happening.

Communicating with your parent(s) or guardian(s)

Except for situations such as those mentioned above, I will not tell your parent or guardian specific things you share with me in our private therapy sessions. This includes activities and behavior that might upset your parent or guardian, but only if these do not put you at risk of serious and immediate harm. I will need to use my professional judgment to decide whether you are in serious and immediate danger. If I feel that you are in such danger, I will communicate this information to your parent or guardian.

Example #1: alcohol. If you tell me that you have tried alcohol at a few parties, I would keep this information confidential. If you tell me that you are drinking and driving or that you are a passenger in a car with a driver who is drunk, I would not keep this information confidential from your parent or guardian. If you tell me, or if I believe based on things you've told me, that you are addicted to alcohol, I would not keep this information confidential.

Example #2: sex. If you tell me that you are having protected sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend, I would keep this information confidential. If you tell me that, on several occasions, you have engaged in unprotected sex with people you do not know or in unsafe situations, I will not keep this information confidential. You can always ask me questions about the types of information I would disclose. You can ask in the form of "hypothetical situations," for example: "If someone told you that they were doing _____, would you tell their parents?"

Even if I have agreed to keep information confidential, I may believe that it is important for them to know what is going on in your life. In these situations, I will encourage you to tell your parent or guardian and will help you find the best way to tell them. Also, when meeting with your parents, I may sometimes describe problems in general terms, without using specifics, in order to help them know how to be more helpful to you.

You should also know that, by law in Virginia, your parents or guardians have the right to see any written records I keep about our sessions. If your parents are separated or divorced, this is true for both custodial and non-custodial parents. It is extremely rare that a parent or guardian would ever request to look at these records.

Communicating with anyone else

- **School:** I will not share any information with your school unless I have your permission and permission from your parent or guardian. Sometimes I may request to speak to someone at your school to find out how things are going for you. Also, it may be helpful in some situations for me to give suggestions to your teacher or counselor at school. If I want to contact your school, or if someone at your school wants to contact me, I will discuss it with you and ask for your written permission. A very unlikely situation might come up in which I do not have your permission but both I and your parent or guardian believe that it is very important for me to be able to share certain information with someone at your school. In this situation, I will use my professional judgment to decide whether to share any information.
- **Doctors:** Any other doctor who is working with you may want to talk with me, for example, your pediatrician or a psychiatrist if you are taking medication. I will get your written permission and permission from your parent or guardian in advance to share information with your doctor. The only time I will share information with your doctor even if I don't have your permission is if you are doing something that puts you at risk for serious and immediate physical or medical harm.