

MANAGING APPOINTMENT SCHEDULING

All scheduled appointments should be well documented, and a card with the date and time of the next appointment should be given to the patient whenever possible.

Managing missed appointments can be difficult. In addition to causing financial distress to a practice, repeatedly missed appointments can be detrimental to patients. For both of these reasons, it is important to provide a financial incentive for attendance, while remaining sensitive to the fact that patients occasionally need to miss or reschedule appointments due to situations beyond their control. The most important thing is for you to have the patient's commitment to honoring scheduled appointments. We recommend developing a contract that clearly delineates your practice's appointment policies and having your patients read and sign it prior to beginning treatment.

Many psychiatric practices allow their patients to cancel appointments without penalty as long as the practice is given either twenty-four or forty-eight hours notice. Select a length of time that meets your practice's needs in terms of being able to reschedule the time slot. If an appointment is canceled at the last minute, it is common to require either full or partial payment (for both individual and group sessions, although you may want to utilize different policies for each scenario). It may be helpful to impose financial penalties in increments (e.g., excuse the first cancellation, charge half of the fee for the second missed session, and charge the full fee for the third missed appointment and any beyond that). When there are extenuating circumstances, exceptions can always be made at the practice's discretion.

Note: You are not permitted to bill Medicare for missed appointments. However, if it is your office policy to bill all patients a fee for missed appointments, you should have your Medicare patients sign the same contract that your other patients sign, which stipulates they will be personally responsible for paying for missed sessions. Some managed care organizations (MCOs) also state in their contracts that you may not charge for missed appointments. If this is the case, you will not be able to receive compensation from the MCOs for appointments missed by their patients. However, just as with Medicare, if the patient signs the contract that she understands she will personally responsible for paying for missed appointments, you can bill the patient.

When a patient demonstrates a pattern of canceling appointments, or misses an appointment without calling to cancel, it is appropriate to remind him of the policy. It may be necessary to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of continuing treatment with him at this time. If there is agreement that further treatment would be beneficial, it is appropriate to obtain (or reobtain) the patient's commitment to participating fully in the treatment process, including being present for scheduled sessions.

Some practices set aside an hour or two each week for make-up sessions. While this arrangement gives both the practice and patients some flexibility, it may on occasion leave this time unused (and thus unreimbursed). It also might encourage patients who are aware that a make-up time exists to miss appointments. However, having spare hours can be very helpful for last-minute appointments with patients who are in emotional crisis. It can also provide time for doing administrative work.

See Appendix O for a sample policy on missed appointments.