

Types of Mental Health Professionals

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There are over a half-dozen different professions that provide services that focus on helping a person overcome a mental health concern or some significant life issue. There are dozens more variations on these, which can lead to a great deal of confusion in the marketplace. The largest difference between the types of professionals is usually what they focus or specialize in, and their educational background. A brief run-down of some of the major professions:

Psychiatrist - A psychiatrist is a medical doctor and the only professional that specializes in mental health care and can prescribe medications. (Family doctors often prescribe medications for mental health concerns, but do not have specialized training or background in treatment mental disorders.) Most psychiatrists focus on prescribing the appropriate medication that's going to work best for that individual and their concerns; a few also do psychotherapy.

Psychologist - A psychologist is a professional who does psychotherapy and has a doctorate degree (such as a Ph.D. or Psy.D.). Psy.D. programs tend to focus on clinical practice and result in the professional having thousands of hours of clinical experience before they enter practice. Ph.D. programs can focus on either clinical or research work, and the amount of clinical experience a professional will gain varies from program to program. Psychologists receive specific training in diagnosis, psychological assessment, a wide variety of psychotherapies, research and more.

Clinical Social Workers - Typically a clinical social worker will have completed a Master's degree in social work (M.S.W.) and carry the LCSW designation if they are doing psychotherapy (Licensed Counselor of Social Work). Most programs require the professional to go through thousands of hours of direct clinical experience, and the program focuses on teaching principles of psychotherapy and social work.

Psychiatric Nurses - Most psychiatric nurses are trained first as a regular registered nurse (R.N.), but get specialized training in psychiatry and some forms of psychotherapy, typically including up to 500 hours of direct clinical experience. Psychiatric nurses in most states may also carry prescription privileges, meaning that they can often prescribe the same kinds of medications that a psychiatrist can.

Marriage & Family Therapist - These therapists tend to have a Master's degree (but can have as little as a Bachelor's degree or less in some states) and typically have between hundreds to thousands of hours of direct clinical experience. Because this designation varies from state to state, the quality of the professional may also vary significantly from person to person. (Not to be confused with California's Marriage, Family and Child Counselors, which have much more stringent requirements, including a Master's degree and 3,000 hours of direct clinical experience.)

Licensed Professional Counselor - The requirements for this designation, which can be in addition to the professional's educational degrees, vary from state to state. Most are Master's level professionals who have had thousands of hours of direct clinical experience.

Other - There are a wealth of other professional designations and initials that follow professionals' names. Most of these designate a specialty certification or the like, not an educational degree.

The key to choosing which one of these professionals is right for you is to determine what kinds of things are important to you and finding a professional that seems to fit with your needs and personality. Often times, finding the right therapist or mental health professional takes more than one try. You may need to "try on" a few professionals before finding one that feels right to you. Don't be afraid to do this, as it is your well-being and treatment you're investing in.

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