

Types Of Mental Health Professionals

Many types of mental health care professionals can help you achieve your recovery goals. These professionals work in inpatient facilities, such as general hospitals and psychiatric facilities, and outpatient facilities, such as community mental health clinics, schools and private practices.

Health care professional job titles and specialties can vary by state. The descriptions below give an overview of what to look for and what credentials to expect from a mental health professional. Finding the right professional is easier when you understand the different areas of expertise and training.

The NAMI HelpLine (1-800-950-6264) can provide information on how to find various mental health professionals and resources in your area. Please note that we are unable to provide specific recommendations to individual providers as we are unable to speak to the quality of their care.

Assessment And Therapy

Therapists can help someone better understand and cope with thoughts, feelings and behaviors. They can also offer guidance and help improve a person's ability to achieve life goals. These mental health professionals may also help assess and diagnosis mental health conditions.

Psychologists

Psychologists hold a doctoral degree in clinical psychology or another specialty such as counseling or education. They are trained to evaluate a person's mental health using clinical interviews, psychological evaluations and testing. They can make diagnoses and provide individual and group therapy. Some may have training in specific forms of therapy like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) and other behavioral therapy interventions.

Degree requirements: Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in a field of psychology or Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.).

Licensure & credentials: Psychologists are licensed by licensure boards in each state.

Counselors, Clinicians, Therapists

These masters-level health care professionals are trained to evaluate a person's mental health and use therapeutic techniques based on specific training programs. They operate under a variety of job titles—including counselor, clinician, therapist or something else—based on the treatment setting. Working with one of these mental health professionals can lead not only to symptom reduction but to better ways of thinking, feeling and living.

Degree requirements: master's degree (M.S. or M.A.) in a mental health-related field such as psychology, counseling psychology, marriage or family therapy, among others.

Licensure & Certification: Varies by specialty and state. Examples of licensure include:

- LPC, Licensed Professional Counselor
- LMFT, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist
- LCADAC, Licensed Clinical Alcohol & Drug Abuse Counselor

Clinical Social Workers

Clinical social workers are trained to evaluate a person's mental health and use therapeutic techniques based on specific training programs. They are also trained in case management and advocacy services.

Degree requirements: master's degree in social work (MSW).

Licensure & credentials: Examples of licensure include:

- LICSW, Licensed Independent Social Workers
- LCSW, Licensed Clinical Social Worker
- ACSW, Academy of Certified Social Worker

Prescribe And Monitor Medication

The following health care professionals can prescribe medication. They may also offer assessments, diagnoses and therapy.

Psychiatrists

Psychiatrists are licensed medical doctors who have completed psychiatric training. They can diagnose mental health conditions, prescribe and monitor medications and provide therapy. Some have completed additional training in child and adolescent mental health, substance use disorders or geriatric psychiatry.

Degree requirements: Doctor of Medicine (MD) or Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO), plus completion of residency training in psychiatry.

Licensure & credentials: Licensed physician in the state where they are practicing; may also be designated as a Board Certified Psychiatrist by the Board of Neurology and Psychiatry.

Psychiatric Or Mental Health Nurse Practitioners

Psychiatric or mental health nurse practitioners can provide assessment, diagnosis and therapy for mental health conditions or substance use disorders. In some states, they are also qualified to prescribe and monitor medications. Requirements also vary by state as to the degree of supervision necessary by a licensed psychiatrist.

Degree requirements: Master of Science (MS) or Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in nursing with specialized focus on psychiatry.

Licensure & credentials: Licensed nurse in the state where they are practicing. Examples of credentials include, but are not limited to:

- NCLEX, National Council Licensure Examination
- PMHNP-BC, Board Certification in psychiatric nursing through the American Academy of Nurses Credentialing Center

Primary Care Physicians

Primary care physicians and pediatricians can prescribe medication, but you might consider visiting someone who specializes in mental health care. Primary care and mental health professionals should work together to determine an individual's best treatment plan.

Degree requirements: Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) or Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO).

Licensure & credentials: Licensed physician in the state where they are practicing.

Family Nurse Practitioners

Family nurse practitioners (FNP) can provide general medical services like those of a primary care physician, based on each state's laws. Like primary care physicians, they can prescribe medication, but you might consider visiting someone who specializes in mental health care. Family nurse practitioners and mental health professionals should work together to determine an individual's best treatment plan.

Degree requirements: Master of Science (M.S.) or Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in nursing.

Licensure & credentials: Licensed nurse in the state where they are practicing. Examples of credentials include:

- NCLEX, National Council Licensure Examination
- FNP-BC, Family Nurse Practitioner Board Certified

Psychiatric Pharmacists

Psychiatrist pharmacists are advanced-practice pharmacists who specialize in mental health care. They can prescribe or recommend appropriate medications if allowed in their state and practice setting. They are skilled at medication management—meaning they evaluate responses and modify treatment, manage medication reactions and drug interactions, and provide education about medications. Many have completed additional training in child/adolescent psychiatry, substance use disorders or geriatric psychiatry.

Degree requirements: Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD). *Completion of residency training in psychiatric pharmacy is not required, but is common.*

Licensure & credentials: Licensed pharmacist in the state where they practice; may also be designated a Board Certified Psychiatric Pharmacist by the Board of Pharmacy Specialties.

Other Professionals You May Encounter

Certified Peer Specialists

These specialists have lived experience with a mental health condition or substance use disorder. They are often trained, certified and prepared to assist with recovery by helping a person set goals and develop strengths. They provide support, mentoring and guidance.

Social Workers

Social workers (B.A. or B.S.) provide case management, inpatient discharge planning services, placement services and other services to support healthy living.

Pastoral Counselors

Pastoral counselors are clergy members with training in clinical pastoral education. They are trained to diagnose and provide counseling. Pastoral counselors are members of the Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) and can have equivalents to a doctorate in counseling.

Source:

Types of Mental Health Professionals. NAMI, the National Alliance for Mental Illness website. <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Treatment/Types-of-Mental-Health-Professionals>. Updated April 2019. Accessed November 18, 2019.