

## TYPES OF MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS

Information adapted in part from Brandon Mental Health: [brandonmentalhealth.com/is-therapy-for-you/types-of-therapists/](https://brandonmentalhealth.com/is-therapy-for-you/types-of-therapists/).

### Introduction

Choosing a mental health provider? You may be unsure which type is best for you. Your health insurance also may have a say. There are many types of mental health providers. Some strictly manage your medications, some offer psychotherapy, and some help you find services in the community, for example. They may have different licenses, degrees and certifications. States generally license mental health providers and set requirements for training and skills. These requirements can vary widely, so consider reviewing your state's regulations before treatment. The terms that describe mental health providers are used broadly and can mean different things in different states.

### Psychiatrists

Psychiatrists are medical doctors (M.D.) or doctors of osteopathy (D.O.) who specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses. After medical school, they complete at least another four years of residency training. A psychiatrist who passes certain exams can be certified by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology. Some psychiatrists seek further training to specialize in certain areas, such as geriatric or addiction psychiatry.

Because they're medical doctors, psychiatrists can prescribe medications. They also offer psychotherapy. They may work with you on everyday problems like stress or more complex issues like schizophrenia. Psychiatrists work in private practice, hospitals, medical centers, schools and other settings.

### Psychologists

Psychologists are specialists in psychology — a science that deals with the mind, mental processes and behaviors. There are many types. Those who treat mental illnesses are generally clinical or counseling psychologists. The title "psychologist" is usually used for those who have a doctoral degree (Psy.D. or Ph.D.), advanced training, and certain licensing and certification. However, it's sometimes used for someone who has only a master's degree.

Psychologists provide psychotherapy for a range of issues, from marriage problems to personality disorders. They work in private practice, hospitals, schools, community agencies and other settings. Psychologists can't prescribe medications except in New Mexico and Louisiana — the only states with privileges for specially trained psychologists.

### Psychotherapists

Psychotherapist is a general term for a mental health provider. Psychotherapists may be psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses, marriage and family therapists, pastoral counselors, or others who provide psychotherapy.

Be aware that some people who set up shop as therapists have no formal training and aren't subject to any state laws or regulations.

## **Social workers**

Social work is a broad profession. In general, social workers help people overcome social and health problems. Most have a master's degree in social work (M.S.W.), but training and education vary widely. To provide mental health services, they must have advanced training and be licensed by their states.

Licensed clinical social workers (L.C.S.W.) may provide therapy in private practice, psychiatric facilities, hospitals and community agencies. Others may work in employee assistance programs or as case managers who coordinate psychiatric, medical and other services on your behalf. They may specialize in certain areas, such as domestic violence or chronic illness. They can't prescribe medications or order medical tests.

## **Psychiatric nurses**

Psychiatric nurses are licensed registered nurses (R.N.) who have extra training in mental health. They may have an associate degree or a bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree. Their level of training and experience determine what services they can offer. Under supervision of medical doctors, they may offer mental health assessments and psychotherapy, and they may help you manage your medications.

Advanced practice registered nurses (A.P.R.N.) have at least a master's degree in psychiatric-mental health nursing. In general, they can diagnose and treat mental illnesses, and in many states they're authorized to prescribe medications. They also may be qualified to practice independently, without the supervision of a doctor.

## **Mental health counselors**

Mental health counselor is a broad term for a person who provides counseling. Most have at least a master's degree in social work or a related field, have several years of supervised work experience, and are licensed or certified. They may also be called licensed professional counselors, licensed mental health counselors or professional counselors. Licensure and certification require extra schooling, experience and training.

Counselors may specialize in certain areas, such as career counseling, marriage issues or substance abuse. They may work in private practice, community agencies, hospitals, employee assistance programs or other settings. They offer help for a range of problems, from anxiety to depression to job stress to grief.

## **Marriage and family therapists**

Marriage and family therapists evaluate and treat disorders within the context of the family. They typically have a master's or doctoral degree. After additional experience under supervision, they may go on to take an exam to become licensed or certified. Not all states require licensing or certification, however.

Marriage and family therapy is usually brief, averaging about 12 sessions. It focuses on specific problems and solutions. You may meet with a therapist one-on-one, with a partner or with your whole family. These therapists provide help with a range of problems, such as depression, parent-child conflicts and eating disorders.

## Pastoral counselors

Pastoral counselors are trained mental health providers who also have in-depth religious or theological training. They provide psychotherapy and other support in a spiritual context. Certification and licensing varies. There are several levels of certification, each with its own requirements stipulating such things as religious activity, coursework, research, publication and experience.

Pastoral counselors provide a variety of services, such as treatment of mental illnesses, wellness programs, spiritual direction, group therapy, and family and couples therapy. They may work in pastoral counseling centers, schools, religious communities or other settings.

## Psychoanalysts

The term "psychoanalysis" is often used loosely. But it refers to a specific treatment that explores unconscious factors that influence relationships and behavior. It was developed by Sigmund Freud. Virtually anyone can call himself or herself a psychoanalyst, since it's not a legal term. However, many psychoanalysts seek extensive training or certification. Those who train at accredited psychoanalytic institutes are typically medical doctors, psychologists or social workers. They generally undergo at least four years of psychoanalytic training, coursework, their own psychoanalysis, and perform supervised psychoanalysis of others. Treatment is intensive, with several sessions a week for five to 10 years. During this time, you generally lie on a couch and talk about whatever comes to mind.

## Finding a provider for psychological services

Your insurance and financial resources will in large part determine how to find a provider:

### For those with Medi-Cal

You will need to go through your specific county's mental/behavioral health access line. Some relevant county numbers are listed below:

- **Alameda County:** 1-800-491-9099
- **Contra Costa County:** 1-888-678-7277
- **Marin County:** 1-888-818-1115
- **San Francisco County:** 1-888-246-3333
- **San Mateo County:** 1-800-686-0101
- **Sonoma County:** 1-800-870-8786

### For those with private insurance

Go to the website of your insurance carrier (e.g., Blue Cross Blue Shield, United Healthcare). Follow the instructions to search the providers, or "find a doctor". You may have to select a different search option, such as behavioral health, mental health providers, or allied health. Be sure to include the following to continue to narrow your search:

- Your zip code
- The mile radius outside your zip code that you are willing to drive
- Select "psychologist" for counseling and individual or family treatment
- Select "psychiatrist" if you are looking for psychiatric medication management
- You may also choose to search for another one of the above described provider-types (e.g., social worker, licensed professional counselor)

Once you have the list of providers, you will have to call them and should ask questions such as:

- Does the provider still take your insurance? Be sure to also confirm your insurance benefits (e.g., how many visits per year is covered, what is your co-pay, etc.)
- Is the provider accepting new patients? (This may be an option you can choose in your initial search.)
- What is the provider's office hours, length of sessions, etc.?
  
- Do they see children/teens your child's age?
- Do they provide the service you need (e.g., individual therapy, family therapy)?
- Do they have experience with or specialize in the difficulties your child is displaying (e.g., anxiety, depression, ADHD, behavioral difficulties, autism)?

Don't hesitate to ask lots of questions of a potential provider. Finding the right match is crucial to establishing rapport and making sure you're getting the best treatment. Some research suggests that this provider-patient rapport is the most important factor for therapy progress.

**Note:** If you eliminate most or all of the providers on your list after asking these questions, you will have to widen your search by including a larger radius from your zip code and/or by including additional provider types to those you initially searched.

#### For those with additional financial resources

You may choose to find a mental health provider that does not directly take insurance, also called "private pay" or "fee-for-service." To find these providers, you can rely on direct referrals from your medical providers, family members, friends, or school staff. Online resources can also be helpful in this regard, such as Psychology Today (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us>).

As above, once you have some names of possible providers, you will have to call them and ask additional questions to see if they are a good fit for your needs.

#### **Periodically reassess your child's/family's rapport with your mental health provider**

If you don't feel comfortable after the first visit, talk about your concerns at your next session or consider finding a new mental health provider. As time goes by, periodically re-evaluate how you feel and whether your needs are being met. Don't feel compelled to stay with a provider if you're not comfortable.

Although the process of choosing a mental health provider and the treatment itself can be hard work, it can also be rewarding. Your child will learn more effective coping strategies and be better able to manage difficulties including peer/family conflicts, personal challenges, self-esteem, mood regulation, anxiety, and behavioral issues.