

exploring careers in mental health

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If you're interested in helping people with their thoughts, feelings, and life challenges, a career in mental health might be for you! There are many different types of mental health professionals who help people in various ways across many settings. Here's a quick look at some common mental health careers:

1 psychiatrist

What They Do: Psychiatrists are medical doctors who specialize in mental health. They can diagnose mental illnesses and are specially trained to prescribe and manage medications to treat them.

Education: Requires a college degree, then medical school (M.D. or D.O.), followed by several years of special residency training in psychiatry. They must have a medical license.

Where They Work: Hospitals, private practices, clinics, government agencies.

Who They Help: People needing diagnosis and medication management for conditions like major depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia.

2 psychologist

What They Do: Psychologists help people by doing talk therapy and psychological tests. They help people understand their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, but do not prescribe medication. Many psychologists also conduct and publish research.

Education: Requires a college degree plus a doctorate degree (Ph.D. or Psy.D.), which takes 5-7 years after college. They need supervised experience and must pass a licensing exam.

Where They Work: Private practices, hospitals, clinics, schools, universities, research labs, in the legal system.

Who They Help: People dealing with issues like depression, anxiety, trauma, stress, learning problems, or relationship difficulties.

3 licensed professional counselor

What They Do: LPCs provide talk therapy to individuals, couples, families, or groups. They help people work through emotional and general life challenges. It's similar to a psychologist, but is more focused on counseling.

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Education: Requires a college degree plus a master's degree in counseling. They also need thousands of hours of supervised counseling work and must pass a state licensing exam.

Where They Work: Private practices, clinics, hospitals, schools, substance abuse centers.

Who They Help: People dealing with anxiety, depression, stress, grief, career decisions, relationship issues, and personal growth.

4 social worker

What They Do: Social Workers help people cope with life challenges, provide counseling or therapy, connect people with resources like housing or healthcare, and advocate for their clients' needs. Some also go into policy and research work. They look at the whole person and their environment.

Education: Requires a college degree at minimum, and many will go on to get a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree and pass a licensing exam.

Where They Work: Clinics, hospitals, schools, nonprofits, private practices, government agencies, in the legal system.

Who They Help: Individuals, families, and groups facing challenges like poverty, discrimination, abuse, mental illness, or difficulty accessing support systems.

5 school counselor

What They Do: School counselors work with students to maximize their success. They help students navigate and manage emotions, apply academic achievement strategies, and plan for college or other post-high school options. Some school counselors are also LPCs, but they don't have to be.

Education: Requires a college degree plus a master's degree in school counseling. Most school counselors also have to pass a state licensure exam.

Where They Work: High schools, middle schools, and elementary schools.

Who They Help: All students! School counselors work with students who have mental health concerns, academic questions, and questions about college, the military, or the workforce.

6 peer support specialist

What They Do: Peer Support Counselors use their own personal lived experience with mental health challenges or addiction recovery to provide hope, understanding, and practical support to others facing similar struggles.

Education: The main requirement is personal lived experience and recovery. They need to complete specific peer support training and usually get certified by the state, rather than needing a college degree.

Where They Work: Recovery centers, mental health clinics, hospitals, peer-run organizations, or veteran-focused practices like the VA

Who They Help: People currently working through mental health or substance use issues, offering support from someone who truly understands.

7 pastoral counselor

What They Do: Pastoral Counselors offer counseling and support that includes a person's spiritual or religious beliefs along with psychological understanding.

Education: Varies widely; some may be a religious leader (like a minister or rabbi) with extra counseling training/degrees, or a licensed counselor specializing in faith. Specific licensing depends on the state and role.

Where They Work: Churches/synagogues/mosques/temples, faith-based counseling centers, hospitals.

Who They Help: People seeking mental health support within the context of their faith, dealing with grief, moral questions, or life issues.

8 mental health nurse practitioner

What They Do: MHNPs are highly trained nurses specializing in mental health. They can assess conditions, provide therapy, and prescribe medications, looking at both mental and physical health.

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Education: An associates or bachelor's degree in nursing and a license to become a Registered Nurse (RN), then earn a master's or doctoral degree in psychiatric mental health nursing. They need national certification and state licensing.

Where They Work: Hospitals, private practices, clinics, community health centers.

Who They Help: People of all ages needing assessment, medication management, and therapy for various mental health conditions.

9 substance abuse counselor

What They Do: These counselors focus specifically on helping people understand and overcome addiction to drugs or alcohol. They help create treatment plans and strategies to prevent relapse.

Education: Varies by state; can range from certification programs to associate's, bachelor's, or master's degrees. Usually requires specific training, supervised work hours, and passing an exam.

Where They Work: Rehab centers, hospitals, clinics, private practices, community agencies.

Who They Help: People struggling with addiction and their families, focusing on recovery and staying sober.

want to learn more?

This is just a starting point! Talk to your school counselor, do online research using reliable sources like causeandcareer.org, or see if you can talk to someone working in a field that interests you.