

Who provides mental health services?

Mental health services are provided by several different professions, each of which has its own training and areas of expertise.

Psychiatrist – Psychiatrists are physicians with either a doctor of medicine (M.D.) degree or doctor of osteopathy (D.O.) degree, who also has at least four years of specialized study and training in psychiatry. Psychiatrists are licensed as physicians to practice medicine by individual states. “Board certified” psychiatrists have passed the national examination administered by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology. Psychiatrists provide medical and psychiatric evaluations, treat psychiatric disorders, provide psychotherapy and prescribe and monitor medications.

Psychologist – Psychologists have a doctoral degree (Ph.D., Psy.D. or Ed.D.) in clinical, educational, counseling or research psychology. Psychologists are also licensed by individual states to practice psychology. They can provide psychological testing, evaluations, treat emotional and behavioral problems and mental disorders.

Psychiatric/Mental Health Nurse Practitioner – Psychiatric/Mental Health Nurse Practitioners have a four-year college degree in nursing and also complete an approved master’s of science in nursing or doctor of nursing practice. PMHNPs are licensed by individual states and in some states are required to practice under the supervision of a psychiatrist. P.M.H.N.P.s provide a wide range of services to individuals and their families including assessment and diagnosis, prescribing medications and providing.

Psychiatric/Mental Health Nurse – Psychiatric/mental health nurses may have various degrees ranging from associate’s (R.N.) to bachelor’s (B.S.N) to master’s (M.S.N. or A.P.R.N.) to doctoral of psychiatric and medical services, including the assessment and treatment of psychiatric illnesses, case management and psychotherapy. In certain states, some psychiatric nurses may prescribe and monitor medication.

Social Worker – Social workers have a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree or a doctoral degree. In most states, social workers take an examination to be licensed to practice social work, and the type of license depends on their level of education and practice experience. Typically a bachelor’s level social worker provides case management, inpatient discharge planning services, placement services and a variety of other services for an individual’s daily living needs. Master’s level social workers can provide this level of service, but are also able to provide assessment and treatment of psychiatric illnesses, including psychotherapy.

Licensed Professional Counselors – Licensed Professional Counselors have a master’s degree in psychology, counseling or other mental health related fields and typically have two years of supervised post-graduate experience. They may provide assessment and diagnosis

of mental health conditions and individual, family or group therapy. They are licensed by individual states and may also be certified by the National Board of Counselors.

Peer Specialists – The recognition that peers offer a unique window into the recovery process is gaining traction across the nation; learning from someone who “has been there” is often quite helpful.

Certified Drug and Alcohol Counselors – (CADC) certified individuals have expertise in working with people who have substance abuse issues. These providers may have other degrees (e.g., MSW) and have an interest in this area.

How can I locate a mental health professional?

Finding the right professional(s) for you or a loved one can be a critical ingredient in the process of diagnosis, treatment and recovery when faced with serious mental illness. The following sources may help you locate a mental health professional or treatment facility:

NAMI State Organizations and NAMI Affiliates - Speaking with NAMI members can be a good way to exchange information about mental health professionals in your local community. You can find your state or local NAMI organization at www.nami.org.

Primary Care Physician (PCP) – Your primary care physician or pediatrician is an excellent resource for obtaining recommendations and referrals.

Your insurance provider – Contact your insurance company for a list of mental health care providers included in your insurance plan.

American Psychiatric Association (APA) – The APA can find names of members in your area. Find your state branch online, consult your local phone directory or call (703) 907-7300.

Psychiatry department at your local teaching hospital or medical school.

National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has an online directory of clinical social workers. Visit www.socialworkers.org and click on *Resources* or call (202) 408-8600.

American Psychological Association can refer local psychologists by calling (800) 374-2721.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) Center for Mental Health Services has an online database of mental health and substance abuse services and facilities in each state. Visit www.samhsa.gov/treatment.

Reviewed by Ken Duckworth, M.D., May 2013