

Who's Who?

What do all these titles and initials mean? While the term psychotherapist applies to psychologists, marriage and family counselors, licensed clinical social workers, and licensed professional counselors, there are substantial differences in education and training in these professions. There is also confusion between psychologists and psychiatrists, as they are both referred to as doctors.

Psychologists typically have PhD, PsyD, or EdD after their names. A licensed psychologist obtained a doctorate degree in psychology from an accredited university or program, which usually entails 4 to 5 years of coursework, as well as a research project culminating in a dissertation (for PhD and EdD) or project (PsyD).

All psychologists are required to have performed 3,000 hours of supervised psychotherapy and/or testing before sitting for the psychology licensing exam. Some psychologists are board certified (identified as diplomate) in a sub-specialty, such as clinical or forensic work, meaning that they have voluntarily obtained advanced coursework and supervision, and passed an additional exam.

Psychiatrists (MD or DO) have graduated from medical school and passed the state examination for their medical license, and then completed a four year residency in psychiatry. The residency includes rotations in a variety of treatment settings, and specialized training in medications and psychotherapy. Often, psychiatrists will note that they are Board Certified (BC) which requires additional training and recertification every 10 years.

While most psychiatrists focus on pharmacological interventions (medications and medication management), some also provide psychotherapy. More typically, a client might see a psychiatrist in conjunction with another type of psychotherapist when medication is included as part of treatment.

Psychiatric nurses (PMH, PMHN or RNP) are professionals who have master's degrees in mental health nursing, and who have two years of supervised experience in psychiatric treatment centers. While they are generally supervised by a psychiatrist, they can prescribe medications and provide medication management. Some are also qualified to provide psychotherapy and practice independently.

The remaining three categories of psychotherapy professionals (LMFT, LPC and LCSW) hold a two year master's degree from accredited programs in their fields. They have also accumulated supervised psychotherapy hours (3000 for LMFTs and LPCs, 3600 for LCSWs), and passed the licensing exams in their respective fields. There are, however, some differences in training and approach to treatment.

The coursework for marriage and family therapists (LMFT) focuses on marital and family issues, and LMFTs often obtain half their supervised hours in couples and family treatment. LMFTs

approach client issues from a relational or “systemic” approach, even when they are working with individual clients.

As with LMFTs, licensed clinical social workers (LCSW) also have a systemic as opposed to individual orientation in their work, but that “system” incorporates not only the client’s past and present interpersonal history, but also their larger socio-economic, cultural and organizational environment. Given this focus on the interactions between individuals or families and their entire social context, social workers receive training in navigating public programs, governmental institutions, and health care, education, and justice systems, to ensure that clients have the appropriate resources and support structures to function optimally.

Licensed Professional Counselors (LPC or LPCC) were approved to practice psychotherapy in California within the last 10 years. Although LPCs have exposure to a broad range of issues in human development, often their master’s level training includes a specific emphasis on areas like substance abuse and recovery issues, career counseling, and disability services.

Some professionals also describe themselves as psychoanalysts. Typically, psychoanalysts are physicians and therapists who receive additional coursework at an analytic institute and their treatment is supervised by a senior analyst. As part of their training, they also undergo their own analysis. There are no licenses specific to psychoanalysts.

There are other professionals who interact with clients, such as alcohol or substance abuse counselors, but generally, these contacts occur in a multi-disciplinary setting, such as an inpatient psychiatric treatment center, and these providers are not the primary psychotherapists. If there is uncertainty about someone’s qualifications, always ask about their background and training for their role.

While the education and training of psychotherapy professionals can vary, studies have found that the most important determinant of a successful therapy experience is the quality of therapeutic alliance between the client and psychotherapist. For the client, factors like feeling understood and perceiving the therapist as trustworthy and competent contribute to that therapeutic alliance. For the therapist, their past preparation for their profession and their participation in continuing training demonstrates that they are committed partners in the treatment process.

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