

Are You Interested in a Career in Mental Health?

I have been in the mental health field for over twenty years and I still enjoy when people ask me about the career choices in my field. Fortunately, I have worked in numerous settings including clinics, hospitals, and universities. This broad background has given me some unique insights about the multiple opportunities the mental health field has to offer. The following is a brief overview of some of the career choices in mental health today. If you are considering a career in mental health, I highly recommend that you do much more research in your future field of choice.

There are three very broad areas in mental health: social work, psychology, and psychiatry. A social worker is a person who typically has a master's degree in social work, which requires six years of college. Once that person graduates, he or she may work with clients to help them obtain services in their community. These jobs are quite rewarding, but the pay is typically low. A licensed social worker has a master's degree and can counsel people privately and receive third-party reimbursement (insurance). Some social workers are employed in the challenging field of substance abuse therapy. This field is highly specialized, and many employers expect their substance abuse counselors to get certified in drug and alcohol counseling. Social workers work in the community, residential facilities, for agencies or in private practice. Some become psychiatric social workers in hospitals and/or clinics. Some less common social work areas are art therapy, dance therapy, and music therapy. While these jobs are scarce and sometimes low paying, the quality they provide to their clients' lives is priceless.

A psychologist is a person who typically has a doctorate in psychology or a closely related field like counseling or counselor education. A doctorate may take eight years of college to obtain, and the course work can be extremely difficult. The emphasis in college is on research and supervision, and sometimes on psychological testing. There are three types of psychology doctorates: Ph.D, Psy.D. and Ed.D. Through each of these degrees, the psychologist learns how to effectively treat people with mental health concerns through empathy and behavioral change. A psychologist can specialize in child psychology, adolescent psychology, spiritual counseling, testing, forensic psychology or teaching. While psychologists earn a good income and enjoy respect for their degree, they cannot prescribe medications. But, it is essential that psychologists understand the effects of all the popular antidepressants, mood stabilizers and antipsychotic because some of their patients take them.

Psychiatrists are medical doctors that typically spent one year of training in psychiatry, which is highly specialized in understanding how the brain reacts to the above-mentioned drugs. Since psychiatrists are medical doctors, they have eight years or more in college, and they have to be licensed. Because they are highly skilled, intelligent medical doctors, they can diagnose and treat patients. Most psychiatrists treat with medicine only and do **not** spend time with their patients on talk and behavioral therapy. This is almost always surprising to people who report that they only spend a few minutes with their psychiatrist and walk out of the clinic with a prescription. I always respond to these bewildered people; "Walk into a shoe store and don't be amazed when you walk out with shoes." But their confusion is not necessarily their fault. Hollywood has repeatedly misrepresented psychiatrists over decades to the point of convincing the public

that all psychiatrists spend hours with their couch potato clients. There are a few psychiatrists that function as both medical doctor and therapist, but they are scarce.

If you are considering a career in mental health you need two qualities to succeed: compassion for people and a strong commitment to ethics of the profession.