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Different Types of Mental Health Professionals

The different types of mental health professionals differ in training, philosophy, and experience. When choosing a psychotherapist, you may find that the "fit" is more important to you than the therapist's specific discipline. Insurance companies usually reimburse only for professionals licensed by the state of Texas.

- **Psychologists** have doctoral level training (PhD or PsyD) in clinical or counseling psychology. This may take 4-8 years of graduate school after college. Psychologists receive extensive training in psychotherapy (with at least two years of clinical internship), but may have less experience than a psychiatrist in handling serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. Psychologists are not medical doctors, and so do not prescribe medication or admit someone to a hospital. Most psychologists (and other non-MD psychotherapists) work with psychiatrists who can prescribe medication if needed. The term "licensed psychologist" is redundant, because by law one must be licensed by the state in order to use the term "psychologist."

- **Psychiatrists** are physicians who complete at least four years of psychiatric residency after earning their MD or DO degree. Psychiatrists can prescribe medication and hospitalize patients, if needed. This type of training is often essential in treating schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and severe depression. A psychiatrist may offer psychotherapy or concentrate strictly on medical treatment. When looking for a psychiatrist, ask whether he or she performs psychotherapy and what type. Psychiatrists who specialize in using medication are sometimes called psychopharmacologists.

- **Clinical social workers** (LCSWs) have master's degree level training. While not all specialize in psychotherapy, many receive training in therapy and understanding how people function within their families and communities.

- **Marriage and family therapists** (MFTs) are master's level professionals trained to help with conflicts within marriages and families. They may have less training and experience in individual therapy.

- **Licensed professional counselors** (LPCs) have at least a master's degree, and complete 36 months or 3000 clock hours of supervised experience.

Psychotherapy is also available from other licensed mental health practitioners, including psychiatric nurses, clinical nurse specialists, and trained members of the clergy. Although it's impossible to predict exactly how many therapy sessions you'll need, it's reasonable to ask a therapist for an estimate of how long therapy will take, and how and when he or she will evaluate your progress.

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