# An Overview of Mental Health Careers and Pathways

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Intrigued by pursuing a career in the mental health field? There's a lot to consider! I encourage students to think backwards: What do you want your day-to-day to look like in your career? Don't think about the specific job title you want or the degree you think you need, but what do you actually want your job to consist of?

Consider the following questions[1]:

1. Interested in research? Teaching? Clinical practice (offering therapy or conducting assessments)? Consulting? Mentoring students? Working with young children? Adolescents? Adults? Older adults?
2. Do you want to work in a hospital? A university? A teaching-focused college? An elementary or secondary school? A business corporation? The government? A VA? A non-profit? Independently for yourself?
3. Who will your colleagues be? What kind of job stability do you want? What salary? A consistent salary or one based on billable hours?
4. How many years are you willing to dedicate towards training? Are you willing to move, perhaps several times, in order to complete all aspects of training?

Different types of graduate degrees can ultimately facilitate different of those above goals. It's important that you find the degree pathway that will best facilitate what you actually want your day-to-day job to be. Often, we hear the language of "clinical psychologist" the most – that's who is represented in the department and the term most often heard in the media. But in actuality, doctoral-level clinical psychologists represent only approximately 15% of all mental health providers in the United States.

[1] I *strongly* recommend this guide. The guide is well-written, updated regularly, and spot-on: Prinstein, M. (2025). *Mitch's uncensored advice for applying to graduate school in clinical psychology*. https://mitch.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4922/2017/02/MitchGradSchoolAdvice.pdf

Table of Contents

**Mental Health Professions: What They Do and Graduate Training Requirements 3**
Clinical Psychologists 3
Counseling Psychologists 3
School Psychologists, Specialist Level 3
School Psychologists, Doctoral Level 4
Clinical Neuropsycho- logists 4
Social Work 4
Mental Health Counselors 4
Marriage and Family Therapists 5
Psychiatry 5
Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner 5
**Graduate School Decision Tree 6**
**Frequently Asked Questions 7**
Note to faculty advisors 7
What's the difference between a PhD and PsyD? 7
I want to be a therapist. What degree should I choose? 8
Clinical and Counseling Psychologists seem to do the same types of things. What is the distinction? 8
Can a master's degree in Clinical Psychology prepare me to be a therapist? 8
What makes a competitive applicant for Clinical Psychology PhD programs? 9
What makes a competitive applicant for master's level programs? 11
I'm interested in both community and clinical psychology. Are there programs that provide training in both? 11
Can I specialize in a particular area or population in graduate school? 11
If a program says that the GRE is optional…is it really optional? 12

# Mental Health Professions: What They Do and Graduate Training Requirements

| Profession[2] | Degree | Length of Training | What They Do | Link to Find Accredited Graduate Programs[3] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Clinical Psychologists | PhD<br>PsyD | Total = minimum 6 years<br>4-6 years on-campus<br>1 year clinical internship<br>1-2 years post-doctoral fellowship | • Research<br>• Psychotherapy<br>• Psychological testing<br>• Some states have psychiatric prescribing privileges[4] | https://accreditation.apa.org/accredited-programs |
| Counseling Psychologists | PhD<br>PsyD | Total = minimum 6 years<br>4-5 years on-campus<br>1 year clinical internship<br>1-2 years post-doctoral fellowship | • Research<br>• Psychotherapy<br>• Psychological testing | https://accreditation.apa.org/accredited-programs |
| School Psychologists, Specialist Level | EdS<br>MA/MS (master's degrees) | Total = 3 years<br>2 years on-campus<br>1 year clinical internship | • Psychological assessment for learning and developmental disorders<br>• Individual and group counseling for mental health and behavioral problems<br>• Consultation and collaboration with teachers and parents<br>• Entry-level degree; can only practice within educational settings (cannot practice independently) | https://apps.nasponline.org/standards-and-certification/graduate-program-approval-and-accreditation/approved-accredited.aspx |

[2] Click on each profession to see a description of what that profession does as well as resources provided by that field's specific professional organization.
[3] *Accredited* is the key word here. You want your graduate program to be recognized by its field as meeting the field's standards for training. If you attend an unaccredited program, you are highly limiting your ability to eventually get independently licensed.
[4] https://www.apaservices.org/advocacy/issues/prescriptive-authority/prescribing-psychologists

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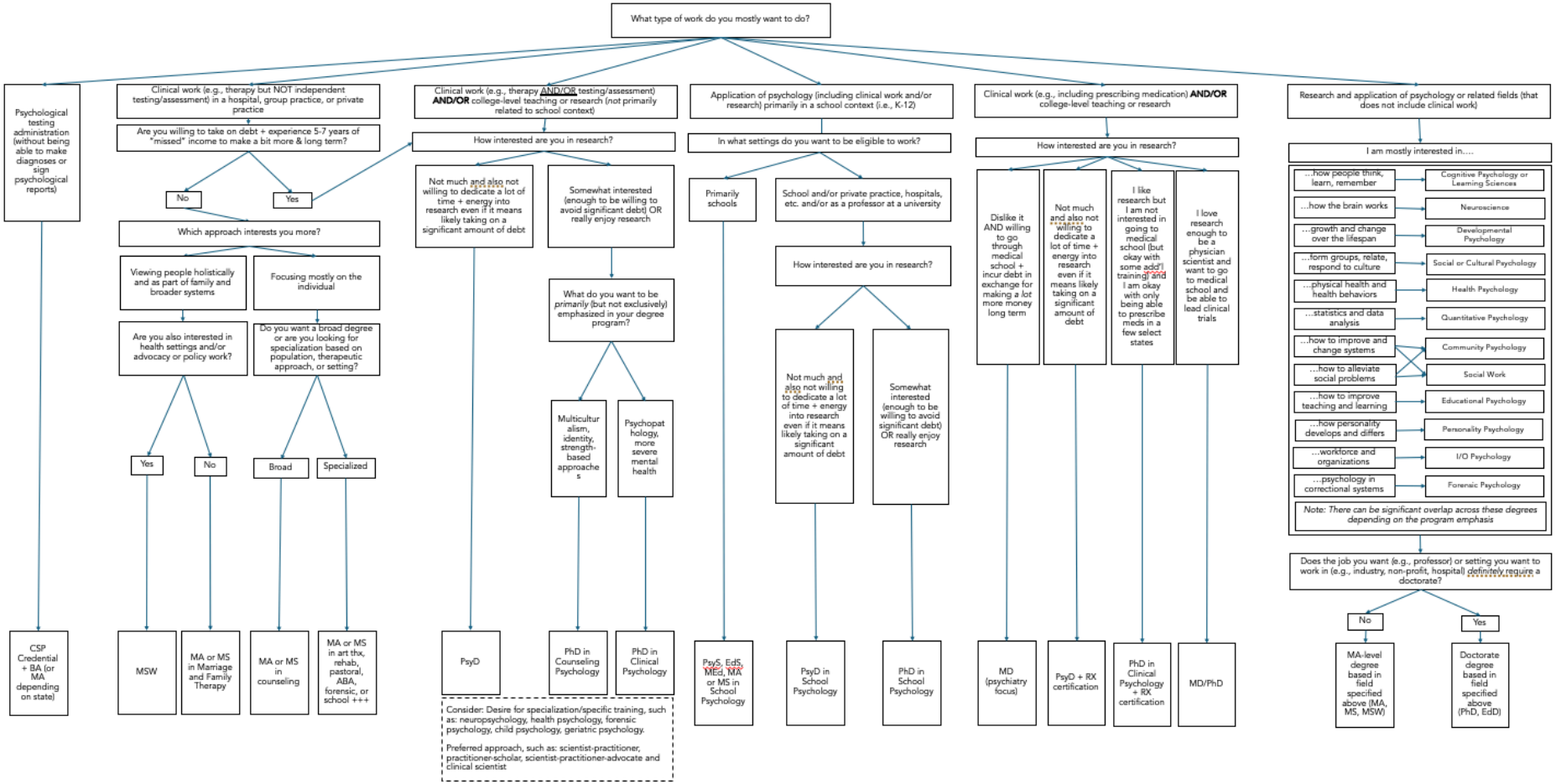
|---|---|---|---|---|
| School Psychologists, Doctoral Level | PhD<br>PsyD<br>EdD<br>(doctorate degrees) | Total = minimum 5 years<br>4-5 years on-campus<br>1 year clinical internship | • Psychological assessment for learning and developmental disorders<br>• Individual and group counseling for mental health and behavioral problems<br>• Consultation and collaboration with teachers and parents<br>• Broader range of settings (school, private practice, clinics, hospitals, academia)<br>• Can practice independently | https://apps.apa.org/accredsearch/ |
| Clinical Neuropsycho-logists | PhD<br>PsyD | Total = minimum 8 years<br>5-6 years on-campus<br>1 year clinical internship<br>2 year neuro post-doctoral fellowship | • Research<br>• Assess and diagnose effects of brain damage and neurological diseases<br>• Cognitive rehab programs | https://accreditation.apa.org/accredited-programs |
| Social Work | MSW | 2 years to degree<br>1 year post-degree supervision | • Basic diagnosis<br>• Psychotherapy<br>• Case management<br>• Strong advocacy and social justice ethos | https://www.cswe.org/accreditation/about/directory/ |
| Mental Health Counselors | MA/MS/M.Ed leads to LPC licensure | 2 years to degree<br>1 year post-degree supervision | • Basic diagnosis<br>• Strong emphasis on psychotherapy (individual, groups) | https://www.cacrep.org/directory/ |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Marriage and Family Therapists | MFT | 2 years to degree<br>1 year post-degree supervision | • Couples and family psychotherapy<br>• Treat a variety of mental health and behavioral problems within the family system | https://coamfte.org/COAMFTE/Directory_of_Accredited_Programs/MFT_Training_Programs.aspx |
| Psychiatry | MD | Total = minimum 8 years<br>4 years of medical school<br>4 years of psychiatry residency<br>Optional specialized 1-2 year fellowships | • Administer psychiatric medication | https://mec.aamc.org/msar-ui/#/landing |
| Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner | MSN, NP (master's)<br><br>DNP (doctorate) | If master's (MSN):<br>2 years to degree + extra certification<br><br>If doctorate (DNP):<br>3-4 years to degree + extra certification | • Administer psychiatric medication | https://www.apna.org/about-psychiatric-nursing/graduate-programs/graduate-programs-in-the-united-states/ |

# Graduate School Decision Tree

Here is a comprehensive guide for navigating the different types of graduate degrees related to mental health, with guiding questions to contemplate. Credit to Yara Meikawi, PhD. You will need to zoom in to read it. The image is also available in her original article.[5]




[5] Mekawi, Y. (2025). Choosing the "right" grad school path for psychology majors. *Medium*. https://medium.com/@yaramekawi/choosing-the-right-grad-school-path-for-psychology-majors-5c8ae3b5ffef

# Frequently Asked Questions

***Note to faculty advisors***

*If you have an additional question that you would like to be added here in the FAQs, please feel free to add it to this list and tag me or whoever you think would be most appropriate to answer the question (you can tag people by putting @TheirName). When you tag someone in this document, I'll receive an email notification so I know to come here and update it with the answer to your question.*

## What's the difference between a PhD and PsyD?

**PhDs = Doctorate of Philosophy in Clinical Psychology**. They are simultaneously a research *and* a practice degree. Substantial amounts of time are devoted to learning how to conduct clinical research in addition to being trained as a practitioner. Generally, a master's thesis and doctoral dissertation are required as well as ongoing research within an advisor's lab and independent projects (depending on the lab). You'll also be doing clinical practicum, usually starting in Year 2 through Year 5. Almost all PhD programs are fully funded, meaning the university covers your tuition and provides a monthly stipend to live off of (note that programs heavily vary in how live-able that stipend actually is; APA-accredited programs are required to report what the annual stipend is as part of data on their websites). Cohort sizes are often very small, anywhere from 4 to 12 graduate students per year, which allows for a lot of individualized attention and training.

**PsyD = Doctorate of Clinical Psychology**. While research and empirically-based treatment is emphasized, they are largely practice degrees. Most time is spent on clinical training, although some amount of research (including a doctoral dissertation) is still required. These degrees developed much later, and heavily vary in their quality. Some are "degree mills" of sorts where they churn out 50+ graduate students per year, who have a very hard time getting adequate individualized attention and supervision, and subsequently, are not well-trained and have low licensure rates. Others are high quality programs producing excellent clinical psychologists. You should really only be considering *accredited* PsyD programs, which is a good way to initially tell if a PsyD program is of quality or not. There are only a few funded PsyD programs in the country (and they are often as competitive as PhD programs), meaning almost all of them require semesterly tuition without any stipend provided. PsyD graduates often incur six-figures of debt. I encourage you to carefully consider if this degree is actually necessary to do what you'd like day-to-day (for example, if you are only interested in psychotherapy, consider a master's level degree).

## I want to be a therapist. What degree should I choose?

“Therapist” is actually an umbrella term that refers to any mental health provider who is competent to provide psychotherapy. As you see in the above table, that actually refers to a number of providers – clinical and counseling psychologists, school psychologists, clinical social workers, mental health counselors, and marriage and family therapists. I encourage you to consider which specific discipline best aligns with your values, specific career goals, and how much graduate training you are willing to complete. For example, for those with a strong pull towards advocacy and social justice, social work may be a great option. For those most interested in providing individual or group psychotherapy, mental health counseling might be most helpful. For those interested in both research and practice, clinical psychology may be the best path. It really just depends on what you value, what you actually want your day-to-day job to look like, and how many years you are willing to tolerate in graduate school.

## Clinical and Counseling Psychologists seem to do the same types of things. What is the distinction?

Yup, they do generally do the same things on a day-to-day basis, and both are doctoral-level mental health providers. Both complete dissertations in graduate school and largely attend the same internship and post-doctoral fellowship sites. The professions are closely related, although they were originally developed separately. Click here to see an overview from the Society of Counseling Psychology that discusses the difference. Broadly speaking, counseling psychology often has a focus on lifespan development and strengths-based approaches to help people adapt to their life circumstances. Clinical psychologists have a heavier focus on treating psychiatric disorders in medical settings. And of course, there is overlap between these two.

## Can a master’s degree in Clinical Psychology prepare me to be a therapist?

This is a surprisingly complicated question. The short answer is no, master’s degrees in *clinical psychology* do not allow one to become a licensed mental health provider after graduation. The purpose of most of these programs is to prepare their master’s students for becoming competitive applicants for PhD programs in clinical or counseling psychology by offering graduate coursework to boost GPA and opportunities to engage in research. Almost none are funded. As of now, I generally only recommend these programs if students are adamant about pursuing clinical/counseling psychology

doctoral programs and do not have the requirements to do so (e.g., several years of research experience, presentations/publications, strong GPA). However, this continues to be an evolving area, as the American Psychological Association (APA) has recently begun exploring the possibility of developing master's level clinical psychology degrees that do lead to independent licensure. This may become an option at some point in the future.

If you're interested in a master's level degree for the purpose of practicing psychotherapy, ensure with the program that their graduate training actually is intended to prepare you for licensure (this should be clearly stated on their website).

## What makes a competitive applicant for Clinical Psychology PhD programs?

Clinical Psychology PhD programs are (quite literally) the most competitive graduate programs in the United States, including lower acceptance rates than either medical school or law school. It is pretty common for folks to apply more than once before they are admitted to a program. It depends on the program, but generally speaking, programs will receive 400-700 applications per year and accept anywhere from 4 to 15 students. Acceptance rate tends to hover between 2-5%. Each APA-accredited program is required to report their acceptance rates as part of larger data on their website, so when you begin exploring specific programs, you can see how competitive they are.

By far, *research experience* is the biggest component that makes someone a competitive clinical psychology PhD applicant. Generally, *at least* 2-3 years of research experience in a psychology lab is expected, including understanding the fundamentals of research (e.g., conducting literature searches, IRB processes, data collection, competency in one or more statistical softwares, basic statistical analyses skills, writing skills, generating research questions, etc.). Additionally, more independent research experience is more highly valued, such as completing an independent research project or an honors thesis, because it shows that you yourself can track a research project from start to finish. These days, at least one (but likely more like 2-3) presentations at regional or national conferences are expected (either talks or poster presentations), and it is becoming increasingly common for applicants to also have publications. Prospective PhD mentors like to see that they do not have to re-teach you a bunch of basic research skills that you should have learned earlier in your education. The purpose of the PhD training is instead to get you more sophisticated and complex research training that becomes increasingly independent.

Another unique component of applying to clinical psychology PhD programs is that admission heavily depends on the *match* between you and your research interests and an individual faculty member at the program who has similar research interests. Yes, you are applying for admissions to a general PhD program, but at most programs, individual faculty decide who they admit into their lab and who they do not. You'll see the phrase "fit" come up a lot in PhD admissions, which means the "fit" between you and your prospective PhD mentor. If you want your research to focus on eating disorders in young adults, you'll want to find prospective PhD mentors that study that topic. If you apply to a program that does not have anyone there who studies eating disorders, your chances of admissions are very low. As such, a key component that makes competitive applicants is the *fit* between their background and research and your background and research.

While internship experience (e.g., working with kids with autism, working at a psychiatric hospital, etc.) can be valuable (especially in ensuring this is the career pathway you'd actually like), it is not heavily weighted in clinical doctoral program applications. Clinical programs do not expect you to come in with clinical skills already trained or prepared. They fully expect to train you in the clinical model that their program adheres to. Internship experiences can be helpful adjunctive experiences (e.g., to enhance your personal statement, to ensure this is the career field that is right for you), but they will largely not make or break your application.

Section 2 of Mitch's Uncensored Guide has excellent advice for what makes applicants competitive for clinical psych PhD programs. Additionally, the Council of University Directors of Clinical Psychology (CUDCP; essentially the organization for faculty running clinical psychology doctoral programs) has put together a great resource for the competencies programs are looking for in their applications: https://cudcp.org/Predoctoral-Competencies. I strongly encourage you to read through their entire page. But briefly, these include:

1. Knowledge competences across the breadth of psychology (typically achieved through performance in psychology major courses)
2. Research competences (typically achieved through supervised research with undergraduate mentors, an honor's thesis, post-baccalaureate research assistant or coordinator positions, any research completed during master's degrees)
3. Clinical competencies (although see caveat above)
4. Values, attitudes, and individual characteristics (for example: scientific mindedness and curiosity, openness, self-driven, willingness to receive feedback, etc.)

5. Competencies to serve a diverse public (for example: commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice and openness to exploring such issues; awareness of how one's own background and beliefs impacts them and their worldview)

## What makes a competitive applicant for master's level programs?

Application processes for master's level programs (e.g., social work, mental health counseling, marriage and family therapy programs) are more similar to undergraduate application processes. In these programs, "fit" has less to do with individual faculty advisors and more to do with how well the program will help you achieve your eventual long-term career goal. Each program will vary a little bit in what they prioritize (and this will be stated on their website), but generally these components are considered:

1. **Academic background** – strong GPA, relevant coursework, GRE scores (if required; since the COVID-19 pandemic, many programs have eliminated their GRE requirement)
2. **Relevant experiences** – any experiences in mental health settings; volunteer work; internships or practicum; psychology research experiences; working with diverse populations; engaging with social justice issues
3. **Personal qualities and skills** – empathy, compassion, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, motivation, willingness to receive feedback

## I'm interested in both community and clinical psychology. Are there programs that provide training in both?

Yes! There are several joint clinical-community psychology PhD programs (for example, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign). Visit this great resource by the Society for Community Research and Action for a list of joint programs: https://scra27.org/what-we-do/education/graduate-programs-in-community-psychology/.

## Can I specialize in a particular area or population in graduate school?

Yes! These days, many programs do allow for specialization during graduate training. Most of the time, these are special "tracks," meaning the programs offer all of the standard training

across its field, plus additional training in a specialized area. For example, I attended a clinical psychology PhD program that had a specialized track in geropsychology. Attending a program with a specialization is not necessary and often does not limit your ability to later specialize in the future. However, it can be helpful if you are confident that is the area you want to be pursuing long-term. Almost all of the databases linked above on Page 2-3 to find accredited graduate programs have filters to find specialized programs. Again, attending a specialized program is not necessary, and I often only recommend it if you are very confident that it's the trajectory you want to follow long-term.

Presently, the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP) recognizes the following specialties:[6]

- Addiction Psychology
- Behavioral & Cognitive Psychology
- Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology
- Clinical Health Psychology
- Clinical Neuropsychology
- Clinical Psychology
- Counseling Psychology
- Couple & Family Psychology
- Forensic Psychology
- Geropsychology
- Group Psychology
- Organizational & Business Consulting Psychology
- Public & Public Safety Psychology
- Psychoanalytic & Psychodynamic Psychology
- Rehabilitation Psychology
- School Psychology
- Serious Mental Illness Psychology

## If a program says that the GRE is optional…is it really optional?

Yes! If a program clearly states that the Graduate Record Examination (GRE; basically, the SAT/ACT for grad school) is optional, then they really mean it. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic when applicants quite literally could not go take the GRE, many programs waived it as a requirement and have never reinstated it. Additionally, there has been an increasing recognition in the mental health field that GRE scores do not actually predict any meaningful graduate outcomes and that there should be much reduced reliance on them[7]. So if a program says that the GRE is optional, it is truly optional.

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[6] I am not aware if other mental health disciplines (e.g., social work, mental health counseling) currently document board-certification in the same way (I do not believe they do).

[7] Roberts, M. C., & Ostreko, A. (2018). GREs, public posting, and holistic admissions for diversity in professional psychology: Commentary on Callahan et al. (2018). *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, *12*(4), 286–290. https://doi.org/10.1037/tep0000219

The only circumstances in which I recommend taking and submitting the GRE when it is listed as optional are if your academic background is not competitive enough for the program (i.e., your GPA is too low or your performance in key psychology coursework is below expectations). A good score on the GRE can indicate to the program that you have the capability to take-on graduate-level coursework. If this is not the case for you, I do not think taking the GRE is necessary.