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So, you want to be a therapist?

If you are an undergraduate psychology major who, ten years from now, would like to be a therapist in a private practice setting providing outpatient psychotherapy to children, adults, couples, and/or families, there are several different graduate school options available to you. Therapists in private practice must have a mental health license in order to practice ethically and legally; this license may be a medical license (psychiatrists), a psychologist license (clinical and counseling psychologists), a social work license (social workers), or a marriage and family therapist license (MFT, formerly known as MFCC, or “marriage and family therapist”).

Psychiatrists

Following the undergraduate degree, psychiatrists complete four years of medical school and three to four years of internship and residency in psychiatry. The medical license is obtained following the internship year, and the certification in psychiatry is obtained following the completion of residency training. Psychiatrists are trained, primarily, in the “disease model” of mental health, with an emphasis on biological underpinnings of psychological problems. Currently, psychiatrists are the only mental health practitioners who are allowed to prescribe medication for the treatment of mental health problems (although this is quickly changing, as psychologists with advanced training are now prescribing psychiatric medications in several states). Once licensed, psychiatrists may work in medical hospitals, psychiatric wards, psychiatric institutions, forensic settings, community mental health clinics, and outpatient private practice.

Psychologists

Following the undergraduate degree, licensed psychologists complete, on average, seven years of graduate school (most doctoral degree programs are designed to be five years; however, the average length of time psychologists spend in graduate school is just over seven years) which includes one year of full-time clinical internship (completed at another institution in a different location than their graduate coursework), and 12 to 18 months of post-degree supervised clinical hours (often completed in the context of a 1 – 2 year postdoctoral fellowship). The doctoral degree may be a Ph.D. (Doctoral of Philosophy, typically in Clinical Psychology), a Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology), or an Ed.D. (Doctor of Education). Psychologists are trained in all approaches to understanding mental illness (e.g., biological, psychological, social) and typically specialize in one area of mental health assessment and treatment (e.g., neuropsychology, behavioral medicine, cognitive therapy, psychoanalysis, etc.). In several states (not California), psychologists who choose to pursue advanced training are now able to prescribe medication for the treatment of mental health problems. Once licensed, psychologists may work in medical hospitals, psychiatric wards, psychiatric institutions, forensic settings, community mental health clinics, and outpatient private practice.

Social Workers

Following the undergraduate degree, social workers complete two years of graduate school, which includes coursework and fieldwork training, to obtain the Masters in Social Work (MSW) degree. The social worker license (LCSW) is obtained following the completion of 12 to 18 months of additional fieldwork training (typically in a paid position) under the supervision of a licensed social worker(s). Social Workers are trained to provide mental health treatment for mildly, moderately, or severely disturbed individuals (children and adults) from a social systems perspective with substantial focus on working with disadvantaged and underserved populations. Once licensed, social workers may work in medical hospitals, in psychiatric wards, psychiatric institutions, forensic settings, government and nonprofit social service agencies, community mental health clinics, and outpatient private practice.

Marriage and Family Therapists

Following the undergraduate degree, marriage and family therapists complete two+ years of graduate school, which includes coursework and fieldwork training, to obtain a Masters in Psychology, a Masters in Counseling, or one of a variety of other masters level mental health degrees. The marriage and family therapist license (LMFT) is obtained following the completion of 12 to 18 months of additional fieldwork training (sometimes paid, but often unpaid) under the supervision of a licensed marriage and family therapist. Marriage and family therapists are trained to provide individual, couples, and family therapy for children and adults who are experiencing mild to moderate dysfunction as a result of psychological problems. Once licensed, marriage and family therapists typically work in community mental health clinics and outpatient private practice.

General Notes

Depending on the nature of their training during graduate/medical school, internship, and supervised hours, licensed mental health practitioners may work with any and all types of patients, provided that they are practicing within their area(s) of competence. Generally speaking, however, psychiatrists tend to work with the most severely disturbed patients, psychologists work with impaired individuals across the range of functioning, and social workers and marriage and family therapists most often work with mildly to moderately impaired individuals. Compensation rates vary; starting salaries for clinicians in hospitals and community agencies are highest for psychiatrists, slightly less for psychologist, and somewhat less for social workers and MFTs. Fees for outpatient psychotherapy are traditionally somewhat higher for psychiatrists than for psychologists or for social workers and MFTs, however in reality these fees vary according to the established reputation and competence of the individual practitioner. The psychiatrist, psychologist, and social work licenses are portable throughout the United States and in most other countries (i.e., are recognized in these other locations and, with verification of hours and sometimes a licensing exam, the practitioner can practice in those locations). The MFT license is recognized in 19 states but not outside of the United States.

Recommendations

If you want to be a therapist, consider what types of populations you would most like to work with, what approaches to mental health treatment resonate most with your theoretical beliefs, and what time and financial resources you are willing to commit to your graduate education and postdoctoral training. For most undergraduate students who are interested in becoming therapists and who are not interested in research or teaching, the LCSW or LMFT makes much more sense than the psychiatrist or psychologist license. For students who are interested in careers that combine teaching and research with clinical practice, one of the doctoral levels degrees is more appropriate.