

SORTING OUT GRADUATE DEGREE AND LICENSURE OPTIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY AND MENTAL HEALTH

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DEGREE OPTIONS:

MSW/LCSW

The Licensed Clinical Social Worker has a masters degree in social work ("MSW"), which is a two-year program offered by Schools of Social Work in public and private universities. The two-year program includes clinical training in psychotherapy for children, adults, families, and couples as well as training in "social systems" (e.g., public mental health, child welfare, disability work, etc.). After obtaining the graduate degree, the license candidate must complete additional supervised clinical hours (usually takes 12 to 18 months to complete), and then pass a licensing exam(s). LCSWs can practice independently and be paid by health insurance companies. Many LCSWs work in government, private, and non-profit agencies as salaried employees doing clinical work, crisis management, administration, or policy development. The LCSW is recognized in all states and throughout the world.

MA/MFT

A Master of Arts (MA) is a postgraduate academic degree typically based in fine art, humanities, social science, theology, or other liberal arts areas of study. It requires two years of study, sometimes including a thesis. Many counselors hold a master's degree, and occasionally Ph.D. psychologists earn a master's "en route" to earning their doctorate degree. Once a clinically oriented masters degree is obtained, individuals who obtain additional supervised clinical hours (usually takes 12 to 18 months and is often unpaid) are eligible to take the licensing exam(s) to obtain a Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT) license. MFTs can practice independently and be paid by health insurance companies. Occasionally MFTs are employed in government or private community clinics as salaried employees providing mental health services. Therapists with an MFT treat a wide range of problems focusing on families and relationships. Note that not all states recognize the MFT license and it is not recognized outside of the United States.

MS

A Master of Sciences (MS) degree, offered most often by departments of psychology in public universities, is typically a 'stepping stone' to the doctoral degree; students who are not competitive for doctoral programs at the time of completing their undergraduate degree and/or who are undecided about their career direction can obtain a non-clinical master's "en route" to earning their doctoral degree. This degree involves coursework, research, and the completion of an independent research thesis. Often, this degree makes them far more competitive for admission to doctoral programs. It is NOT a clinical training program and graduates are not eligible to become licensed and practice as a mental health worker.

EdD

The EdD degree is awarded by a School of Education. Many professionals with a Doctor of Education practice therapy. They are trained in child development and education, sometimes with a focus on educational planning and assessment. A total of four years of study after the bachelor's degree

is usually necessary to receive an EdD. Most graduates will assume or continue roles as leaders in PreK-12 education and related arenas of practice (e.g., state departments of education). The Ed.D. curriculum normally emphasizes a broad scope of knowledge and skills related to understanding the context of schooling, leading educational organizations, understanding and utilizing research, and evaluating program effectiveness. Some graduates may assume positions in higher education institutions with a primary focus on teaching and the development of educational administrators and other leaders.

PhD in Clinical or Counseling Psychology

The Doctor of Philosophy is an academic degree designed to take 4 to 5 years to complete; however, on average, because in most programs students are required to complete an original research dissertation, the degree takes just over seven years to complete. Many therapists hold a PhD, which emphasizes theory as well as research. Individuals with a PhD in clinical or in counseling psychology are also fully trained in the assessment and treatment of all behavioral conditions. Those with PhDs in clinical or counseling psychology (from APA-approved programs) who have completed pre- and post-doctoral supervised clinical hours (in APA-approved programs) are eligible to obtain a psychologist license. The psychologist license is recognized throughout the United States and in most parts of the rest of the world. Licensed psychologists work in inpatient and outpatient settings (as independent practitioners or as salaried employees for government, public, and private agencies) treating individuals, couples, and families with a wide range of severity of psychiatric conditions. In many states, psychologists also have the option to obtain advanced training and become licensed to prescribe psychiatric medications. Individuals with a Ph.D. in Clinical or Counseling Psychology from a university (as opposed to a free-standing professional school) are qualified to obtain tenure-track faculty positions in 4-year universities teaching and conducting research.

PhD in Other Fields of Psychology

PhD's can also be awarded in cognitive psychology, school psychology, institutional/organizational psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, neuropsychology, quantitative psychology, and many other fields. Individuals with non-clinical PhDs in psychology do not deliver mental health treatment (and are not licensed to do so) but rather work as teachers and/or researchers, most often in academic settings.

PsyD

The Doctor of Psychology, PsyD, is a professional degree, typically offered by free-standing professional schools or by Schools of Education within universities. The PsyD focuses on the practical application of therapy and counseling. This degree usually takes five to six years to complete and does not typically require a research dissertation. Individuals with a PsyD who have completed the required pre- and post-doctoral supervised clinical hours are eligible to obtain a psychologist license. The psychologist license is recognized throughout the United States and in most parts of the rest of the world. Licensed psychologists work in inpatient and outpatient settings (either independently or as a salaried employee of a government, public or private agency) treating individuals, couples, and families with a wide range of severity of psychiatric conditions. In many states, licensed psychologists also have the option to obtain advanced training and become licensed to prescribe psychiatric medications.

MD

The Doctor of Medicine is the most common degree held by physicians and surgeons. Most MDs who work in mental health are psychiatrists. After completing medical school (4 years), they receive an additional three years of clinical training in mental health specialties. Psychiatrists treat emotional and mental disorders and are licensed to prescribe medication. These professionals may treat psychiatric disorders with therapy in conjunction with psychotropic medications; due to the nature of their training, which is focused on biological underpinnings of the more severe psychiatric disorders, many psychiatrists work in inpatient settings or in outpatient settings with the more seriously disturbed patients. Note: the license to prescribe medications is now available in several states to licensed psychologists with additional training; over the next decade, it is anticipated that all states will offer this additional license to interested psychologists.

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS/AREAS OF CONFUSION/TIPS:

How do I choose between a masters and doctoral degree?

If your goal is to be a therapist and provide outpatient services to individuals, children and families, but you are NOT interested in teaching or research, the masters degree (leading towards either the MFT or the LCSW) will meet your needs. With either of these licenses, you can assess and treat patients/clients, collect fees, and bill insurance companies (at only slightly lower rates) just like individuals who have doctoral-level licenses (psychologists and psychiatrists). This path allows you to achieve your goal of becoming a therapist without devoting 6 to 8 years pre-licensure and at much lower cost.

If you prefer to have the prestige of the doctoral level degree, you really enjoy school and prefer to have more extensive training and preparation, and/or cost and time are not obstacles for you, then the PsyD or the PhD degree, leading to the psychologist license, may be the best fit for you.

If your goal(s) includes research and/or teaching, you should consider a doctoral level degree, most likely the PhD in Clinical Psychology (unless you are not interested in being a therapist, in which case you should aim towards a non-clinical PhD degree).

What is the difference between a PhD and a PsyD?

The two most common doctoral degrees held by individuals who are licensed psychologists are the Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology and the PsyD. The Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, typically offered by departments of psychology in universities, is regarded as a research degree that includes clinical training; individuals who obtain this degree can practice independently as therapists and/or obtain academic jobs teaching and conducting research. The PsyD was first awarded in the late 1960s but increased in popularity due to its de-emphasis on research training. Most PsyD programs, typically offered by freestanding professional schools or Schools of Education, emphasize preparing their graduates for professional practice as practitioner-scholars. Individuals with a PsyD practice as counselors, most often in outpatient settings, and occasionally hold teaching positions (in programs offering the PsyD), but do not conduct research.