

## Types of Mental Health Providers

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There are many different types of mental health care professionals, each with different training and state licensure requirements. The descriptions below give an overview of what to look for and what credentials you might expect from a mental health professional. Finding the right professional is easier when you understand their different areas of training and expertise.

Mental health providers assess and diagnosis mental health conditions, provide treatment and some may prescribe medications. They strive to help people better understand and cope with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that may be causing distress. They can also offer guidance and help improve a person's ability to achieve life goals. Most have at least a master's degree or more advanced education and training. **One major difference is which providers can prescribe medications.** Some people see two different providers for their mental health if they want both medications and therapy, as there are fewer clinicians who do both. If you know you want to take medications, make sure you connect with someone who can prescribe them. And, be sure that the professional you work with is licensed to offer mental health services in your state.

Things to consider when choosing a mental health provider:

**Where do you want to start with your care?** Do you know yet if you want therapy, medication, or both? If you start with one type of care (medication or therapy) you can always add the other later. But asking yourself this question can help you find the right type of provider. If you don't know where to go first, your primary care provider can be a great place to begin the process.

**How specialized or complex is the mental health condition?** Most providers treat a variety of issues, but someone with a specialized focus may be best for certain conditions, such as substance abuse, eating disorders or psychotic conditions. In general, the more severe the symptoms or complex the diagnosis, the more expertise and training you may want from a mental health provider.

**Deciding on medications, therapy, or both.** Not all mental health providers are licensed to prescribe medications and this decision may depend on the issue(s) to be addressed and/or the severity of the related symptoms. Some people may decide to see a psychiatrist to manage medications and a therapist for counseling. Some people see just a psychiatrist or just a therapist.



**Health plan coverage.** Health insurance companies maintain lists of mental health providers who are covered by a person's specific insurance plan. It is important to check ahead of time to find out details related to mental health benefits such as co-insurance, deductibles, out of network benefits, etc. to avoid unexpected bills.

## **Mental Health Prescribers**

The following health care professionals can prescribe medication. They may also offer assessments, diagnoses and therapy.

### **Primary Care Provider**

You might not think of your primary care provider first when you think about getting medication for your mental health, but many are very comfortable with prescribing medication, particularly for more common mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. If you are new to mental health, alerting your primary care provider about what you are experiencing is important so they can follow your care and progress. Our mental health impacts our physical health, and it is a good idea to have the key members of your care team know what is going on.

### **Psychiatrist**

A psychiatrist is a physician – a Doctor of Medicine (MD) or Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DOs). After receiving an undergraduate college degree, psychiatrists complete four years of medical school, and four years in a psychiatry residency training. They may further specialize in specific diagnoses or populations such as addiction medicine, child and adolescent psychiatry, or the care of older adults (geriatrics). A psychiatrist can diagnose and treat mental health conditions, prescribe medication and some provide counseling or psychotherapy. They are trained to distinguish mental health problems from medical conditions that may present with psychiatric symptoms.

### **Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner (ARNP)/ Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP)**

An ARNP, also known as a nurse practitioner (NP), is a nurse with a master's degree in advanced practice nursing. In Washington State, a nurse practitioner with additional education and certification in psychiatric and mental health assessment, diagnoses, and treatment may be referred to as a Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP). As in many states, ARNPs in Washington are independent practitioners, so are not supervised by a physician. They diagnose and treat mental health conditions, provide counseling or psychotherapy, and prescribe psychiatric medications. If you



want a nurse practitioner who offers both prescribing and therapy, make sure to ask. Not all providers do both.

### **Physician Assistant (PA/PA-C)**

Physician Assistants (PAs) have a bachelor's degree and then receive a master's degree from a physician assistant program. Some PAs specialize in psychiatric/mental health care and offer their services under the supervision of a psychiatrist. PAs who specialize in psychiatry can diagnose and treat mental health conditions and prescribe medication.

### **Mental Health Therapists / Counselors**

The terms "therapist" and "counselor" are often used interchangeably and typically focus on providing psychotherapy, or counseling, to individuals, families, couples, or groups, in a variety of practice settings and specialties. Their goal is to help people overcome mental health challenges, life stress, and other obstacles that may be impacting their lives. If licensed in their area of practice, they may independently diagnose and treat mental health issues. These providers do not prescribe medications but may work with those who do.

Mental health providers in this category have completed an undergraduate college degree and then at least a master's degree in behavioral health that includes a clinical internship. After completing the master's degree, they must complete several thousand hours of direct work with clients under the supervision of a licensed mental health professional and then may take a state licensing exam. They may go on to specialize in particular types of therapy such as cognitive behavioral or psychodynamic or focus their practice on specific populations such as trauma survivors, adolescents, or older adults. In many states, licensed counselors must annually complete continuing education hours to maintain their license to practice. Here are a few examples of the types of providers who offer therapy or counseling services.

### **Psychologist (PhD/PsyD)**

Psychologists hold a doctoral degree in clinical psychology or another specialty such as counseling or education - a Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) or a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). They are trained to evaluate a person's mental health using clinical interviews, psychological evaluations, and specialized diagnostic testing. Some may have training in specific forms of therapy.



Licensed psychologists are qualified to do counseling and psychotherapy, perform psychological testing, and provide treatment for mental disorders. They are not medical doctors which means that, except for in a few states, psychologists cannot write prescriptions or perform medical procedures.

**Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist (LMFT)**

LMFTs have at least a master's degree in marriage and family therapy and are trained to treat mental health issues in the context of relationships. They offer services to individuals, couples or with families.

**Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC)**

LMHCs have at minimum a master's degree (MA) in psychology, counseling, or a related behavioral science field and provide a variety of therapeutic interventions. They are qualified to evaluate and treat mental health conditions by providing counseling or psychotherapy.

**Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker (LICSW/LCSW)**

LICSWs have at least a master's degree in social work and provide assessment, diagnosis, counseling, and a range of other services, depending on their licensing, training and practice setting. LICSWs aim to empower people to see their own inner strengths and build upon them to overcome mental health challenges.

