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What is it?What they doFinding careTakeawayMental health counselors are licensed professionals who can help treat the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects of mental health and substance use conditions.Share on Pinterest10'000 Hours/Getty ImagesUntreated mental health conditions can affect not just the mind but also the body and interfere with relationships and work.A mental health counselor might be an option if you or a loved one experiences distressing emotions, thoughts, or behaviors and has trouble managing them.This can be important for many people, as nearly 1 in 5 adults in the United States live with a mental health condition but only about half of them receive treatment.Mental health counselors are licensed professionals who treat the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects of mental health and substance use conditions. They work with individuals, families, couples, and groups in a variety of settings.Mental health counselors use a variety of techniques aimed at promote healthy lifestylesidentify personal stressors and levels of functioningpreserve or restore mental healthMental health counselors and psychologists may provide similar services, but there are distinct differences in education, training, and licensure. Generally, mental health counselors hold an accredited master's degree in counseling and have 2 to 3 years of supervised counseling practice. They may be qualified to help treat several conditions, including:depressionanxiety disordersbipolar disordereating disorderspost-traumatic stress disorderssubstance use disordersphobiasHow much you benefit from counseling may vary depending on the type and severity of the mental health condition, the type of treatment, and treatment adherenceMental health counselors may work with people on many aspects of their mental health, whether that includes anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues. They discuss symptoms and treatment optionsin some states, licensed professional counselors may diagnose mental health conditions, while in other states, they may not be allowed to make a diagnosisidentify stressorsteach them healthy coping and problem-solving techniqueswork alongside other types of medical professionals, including psychiatrists, psychologists, and primary care doctorshelp people develop goals and a treatment planpossibly refer people to other relevant healthcare or social service professionals In particular, mental health counselors may perform psychotherapy to help people understand their behaviors, emotions, and thoughts.Also known as talk therapy, this type of quality therapeutic relationship is one of the most successful predictors of how successful someone's treatment may be. There are a few different types of psychotherapy: Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT): This is an evidence-based therapy that helps people recognize distressing patterns, understand how those influence their behavior, and adopt healthier behaviors.Psyodynamic therapy: This type of psychotherapy focuses on emotion and interpersonal relationships. With a professional's guidance, clients use self-reflection and self-examination to uncover and work through problematic patterns.Interpersonal therapy: A counselor may focus on the relationship between our personal interactions and psychological symptoms. This is a time-limited treatment that typically lasts 12 to 16 weeks. Psychotherapy can help people manage their mental health, whether it's used on its own or alongside other treatments that might include medication.>MORE:Learn more about psychotherapy and how it works.There are several ways to find a mental health care professional near you.You can ask your primary care doctor for a referral, do a general internet search for providers near you, or use one of the following resources: Remember that professional counselor designations may include LPC, LMHC, LCADC, and LPCC. When looking for a counselor, here are a few things to consider:How much do they charge? Will your insurance cover sessions? Does your insurance require a referral from a primary care doctor or psychiatrist? Do they specialize in certain treatment areas (e.g., substance use, eating disorders)? Do they offer telehealth appointments? Effective therapy relies on a good relationship between the therapist and client. Consider who you'd feel most comfortable opening up to: a certain gender, person of color, someone from your faith, etc.The symptoms of an untreated mental health condition can interfere with your day-to-day life.If you or a loved one needs support, reach out to a healthcare professional about treatment options and whether mental health counseling is right for you. On the large menu of mental health services, you'll find an alphabet soup of licensed professionals—including licensed mental health counselors or L.M.H.C.s. Could one be right for you? Learn everything you need to know about mental health counselors, including how they differ from other experts, average costs and how to find one. Many people face mental health challenges. In fact, 26% of U.S. adults experience a mental health disorder diagnosis each year, making conditions like anxiety and depression far from unusual. Yet, even when mild, mental illness can impact a person's quality of life, underscoring the critical importance of seeking quality care and support. That's where a mental health counselor can help. A mental health counselor assesses and treats mental and emotional health disorders, relationship issues and life challenges. Through various methods of psychotherapy, counselors work with patients to develop meaningful behavior changes. They also offer coping strategies for navigating life's struggles. "Counselors can provide support and guidance and help to identify triggers, cope with negative emotions and reduce symptoms in order to improve the individual's quality of life," says Aaron Sternlicht, a licensed mental health counselor in New York and co-founder of Family Addiction Specialist. Counselors often specialize in certain areas. In general, they're trained to help people with: Anxiety Depression Substance abuse Sexual dysfunction Eating disorders Personality disorders Dementia Adjustment disorders brought on by a major life change, such as divorce or a new baby Persistent and recurring symptoms may signal it's time to seek professional help. If you're experiencing any of the following for two weeks or more, consider reaching out to a mental health counselor for guidance: Difficulty sleeping Appetite and weight fluctuations Struggling to focus Losing interest in hobbies or activities Inability to carry on with daily routines Suicidal/self-harm ideation Mental Health Counselor Requirements To become licensed to practice in their state, mental health counselors must complete a master's program in counseling, which typically takes two years. As part of this program, students take part in supervised fieldwork. Mental Health Counselor vs. Therapist An array of professionals—such as social workers, counselors, psychologists, marriage and family therapists—can still technically be called therapists at the state-licensed level, because they provide therapy. However, while mental health counseling and therapy are often used synonymously, there are key differences, says Sternlicht. In terms of licensing, a counselor will earn a L.M.H.C. (licensed mental health counselor), L.C.S.W. (licensed clinical social worker) or L.P.C. (licensed professional counselor). A therapist, on the other hand, will receive an L.M.F.T. (licensed marriage and family therapist). "Mental health counseling is generally shorter term and focuses on addressing a specific, present problem," he says. Conversely, a therapist may use their sessions to explore what Sternlicht calls "deeper underlying thoughts, feelings and behaviors that are caused by unconscious issues and conflicts." Achieve your potential with Talkspace online therapy Thousands of licensed therapists Message your therapist 24/7 Insured members on average pay a \$20 copay or less Get \$85 Off Your First Month At Talkspace! Using FORBES\$5 at checkout Convenient and affordable online therapy with Betterhelp Prices vary and start at \$65/week Users can be matched with a therapist within 48 hours Communicate via phone, video, or messaging whenever you feel it's needed Enjoy 20% Off Your First Month Mental health support for your whole being Meet virtually with a therapist, prescriber, or both Custom treatment plans created with your therapist Treatment available for anxiety, depression, insomnia, stress, PTSD, and more Get 50% Off For The First Month Of Any Plan using code FORBES50 Human, virtual mental health care from doctors who take insurance Adheres to the highest standards of care Represents a diverse range of specialties and identities Offers virtual visits, flexible scheduling, medication management and therapist matching Mental Health Counselor vs. Psychologist Both mental health counselors and psychologists must hold a master's degree and be licensed to practice in their states. In addition, psychologists often complete a doctorate in psychology. While there's a lot of overlap between the two roles, psychologists are more likely to work with serious mental illnesses and behavior problems. A counselor is focused on overall wellness and talk therapy, generally. Psychologists may be more focused on analyzing a client from a scientific perspective and treating specific problems. Mental Health Counselor vs. Psychiatrist A mental health counselor guides clients to healing through various modes of talk therapy. For prescriptions for medications to complement therapy, patients must also seek care from a licensed psychiatrist. Trained to assess and diagnose mental health disorders, psychiatrists can prescribe the proper medication and monitor clients through treatment. The cost of counseling varies widely depending on location and treatment. However, mental health counselors typically charge less than other mental health professionals. In Illinois, for example, Jennifer Froemel, the former president of the Illinois Mental Health Counselors Association, and the founder of Innovative Counseling Partners in Chicago, shares that rates for a 60-minute session range from \$65 to \$140, depending on insurance. In Froemel's practice specifically, the average session comes to \$104 an hour. Some counselors offer a sliding payment scale. This means they determine session cost based on what a client can afford. Through the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, most insurance plans are now federally mandated to cover mental health services similarly to how they cover medical services. Every session will vary depending on the client, the issues and the counselor's preferred treatment plan. While many therapists meet weekly with clients, others find biweekly sessions are more effective for particular issues and phobias. "People can expect their therapist to be very curious and seek to understand the client's worldview, thought process, history, behavioral patterns, stressors and how they all contribute to how the person feels," says Sofia Mendoza, a licensed clinical social worker in Long Beach, California. A counselor, who can also be called a therapist, may assign homework, work toward exposure to phobias and practice navigating situations in sessions. "One thing's for sure: You can definitely count on the therapist listening to your concerns with a nonjudgmental stance and recommending different strategies to help you with what you're going through," she says. The experience of finding a mental health counselor is "more of an art than a science," according to Sternlicht. To begin your search: Contact your insurance company for a list of providers covered by your policy. Search mental health provider databases Ask your general practitioner for referrals. Ask friends and family for recommendations. Sternlicht recommends setting up several consultations to find a practitioner who works for you, ensuring they meet the following criteria: They're trained and experienced in addressing your specific challenges. Their approach to counseling sessions is a good fit for you. You can see yourself placing your trust in them. You feel comfortable speaking with them and can see yourself confiding in them. They understand your lived experience and cultural background. Therapy For How We Live Today Talkspace is an online therapy platform that provides users the confidential support of a licensed therapist through an easy-to-use and HIPAA-compliant app. Learn More On Talkspace's Website Online therapy platforms connect you with licensed providers, which can include psychiatrists, psychologists, licensed marriage and family therapists, licensed clinical social workers and licensed professional counselors. Discover our top picks and the best online therapy to fit your needs and preferences. Mental Health Disorder Statistics, John Hopkins Medicine, Accessed 04/15/2021. What You Should Know About Licensed Mental Health Counselors and Their Services, New York State Education Department, Accessed 04/19/2021. Adjustment Disorders, John Hopkins Medicine, Accessed 04/22/2021. Clinical Mental Health Counseling versus Psychology, The Family Institute at Northwestern University, Accessed 04/12/2021. Counselor vs. Therapist vs. Psychologist, HumanServicesEDU.org, Accessed 04/25/2021. Types of Mental Health Professionals, Mental Health America, Accessed 04/19/2021. Health Insurance and Mental Health Services, MentalHealth.gov, Accessed 04/18/2021. Varon, D. Biweekly Cognitive Therapy for Social Phobia. US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health. 2003;5(2):89-90. Finding a Mental Health Professional, National Alliance on Mental Illness, Accessed 04/20/2021 Mental health counselors can help you work through emotional, behavioral, and psychological challenges, with a focus on everyday coping and practical solutions.Mental health professionals come with a variety of titles. While they all work with you to improve your mental well-being, their different titles indicate the scope of their expertise.When you decide to visit a mental health professional, understanding what a mental health counselor does compared to other professionals, like therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists, can help you determine whether they're the right choice for you.A mental health counselor is a graduate-level mental health service professional who has completed a master's degree or higher in a counseling program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs.In addition to their degree, mental health counselors have completed all necessary supervised clinical hours and have obtained their license to practice as determined by the state in which they provide services.Mental health counselors can have several formal titles, such as:licensed professional counselor (LPC)licensed mental health counselor (LMHC)licensed clinical professional counselor (LCPC)licensed alcohol and drug counselor or addiction counselorational certified counselor (NCC)licensed clinical social worker (LCSW)Mental health counselors help people work through current emotional, psychological, and behavioral challenges. They're trained in a variety of therapeutic techniques and take a solution-focused approach to coping and problem-solving for issues related to:stressanxietydepressiontraumarelationshipsmental health disorders, such as bipolar disorderMany mental health counselors are trained in traditional psychotherapy or talk therapy frameworks, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy, or psychodynamic therapy.The scope of a mental health counselor's methods depends on the state in which they provide services. Some states will allow mental health counselors to diagnose mental health conditions, while other states do not.Mental health counselors and psychologists can overlap in their techniques and therapeutic approaches, but they're not the same.While both can fall under the broad classification of "therapists," one of the main differences between them is in education.Mental health counselors have a master's degree or higher in counseling, while psychologists hold a doctoral degree in a field of psychology (which can include counseling psychology).Mental health counselors focus on providing therapy, clinical interventions, coping, goal setting and achievement, and steps toward improved mental well-being. Psychologists incorporate the same methods, but they're also trained to conduct psychological testing and assessments to determine a mental health diagnosis.Another difference between mental health counselors and psychologists is that psychologists can prescribe medication, while mental health counselors cannot.Although it's not always the case, mental health counselors tend to focus on addressing mental health challenges in the short term using practical, everyday ways that can improve mental well-being. Psychologists often take a more in-depth, long-term approach to addressing emotional challenges, trauma, or unconscious patterns of thinking and behaving.Both mental health counselors and psychologists can help when you're experiencing mental health challenges, but you might consider a counselor over a psychologist when you need immediate coping strategies for stress or anxietywould prefer short-term, goal-oriented treatment over a deep exploration of past traumasare working through current relationship, work, or life stresswant to improve your mental well-being and aren't living with a severe mental health conditionMental health services — whether from a counselor, therapist, psychologist, or otherwise — can help people experiencing a range of mental health challenges.A 2021 review found even lay counselors, which are people trained in counseling but without formal licensure, helped to significantly improve mental health symptoms in low and middle income countries around the world.Counselors use evidence-based methods to address mental health challenges. Evidence-based methods have been proven through research to be safe and effective across multiple demographics and scenarios.Examples of evidence-based interventions include:cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)dialectical behavior therapy (DBT)acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)exposure therapy mindfulness-based cognitive therapyAccording to the American Psychiatric Association, around 75% of people who enter psychotherapy show some benefit from it. Your personal success, however, depends on more than a therapy framework's scientific backing.Personal factors that can affect the success of your treatment include:motivation and readiness for changewillingness to self-reflectstigma toward mental health servicescoexisting conditions, such as substance use disorderbarriers to access, such as lack of transportation or an inflexible schedulelack of a relationship between you and your counselorMental health counselors are available in person and virtually. You can find one of these professionals through referrals from your primary care physician or through recommendations by loved ones.You can also search through the following online directories:If you don't find a counselor in your area, consider telehealth. Telemedicine connects you with counselors virtually through video or audio conferencing. It may be more convenient for your schedule, and you can meet with your counselor from the comfort and privacy of your home.A study from 2021 found telehealth to be a viable alternative to in-person therapy sessions for depression. It produced similar depression symptom reduction and increases in quality of life compared with in-person meetings.Mental health counselors are professionals with a master's degree or higher in counseling. They're trained in evidence-based interventions like CBT and focus on everyday, practical solutions to address mental health challenges.Deciding between a mental health counselor and another type of professional, such as a psychologist, is a very personal decision. It's OK to start with one type of mental health professional and then change your mind. It's about finding the right fit for you and your personal needs. Please enable javascript to play this video. Video transcript available at . Quick Facts: Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, and Mental Health Counselors 2024 Median Pay \$59,190 per year \$28.46 per hour Typical Entry-Level Education Master's degree Work Experience in a Related Occupation None On-the-job Training Internship/residency Number of Jobs, 2023 449,800 Job Outlook, 2023-33 19% (Much faster than average) Employment Change, 2023-33 84,500 Substance abuse, behavioral disorder, and mental health counselors advise people on a range of issues, such as those relating to alcoholism, addictions, or depression. Work Environment Substance abuse, behavioral disorder, and mental health counselors work in a variety of settings, such as mental health centers, community health centers, and private practice. Most work full time, although part-time work is common. How to Become a Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, or Mental Health Counselor Education and training requirements vary for entering these occupations. Substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors typically need at least a bachelor's degree, whereas mental health counselors typically need a master's degree and an internship. Some counselors need a state-issued license. Pay The median annual wage for substance abuse, behavioral disorder, and mental health counselors was \$59,190 in May 2024. Job Outlook Employment of substance abuse, behavioral disorder, and mental health counselors is projected to grow 19 percent from 2023 to 2033, much faster than the average for all occupations. About 48,900 openings for substance abuse, behavioral disorder, and mental health counselors are projected each year, on average, over the decade. Many of those openings are expected to result from the need to replace workers who transfer to different occupations or exit the labor force, such as to retire. State & Area Data Explore resources for employment and wages by state and area for substance abuse, behavioral disorder, and mental health counselors. Similar Occupations Compare the job duties, education, job growth, and pay of substance abuse, behavioral disorder, and mental health counselors with similar occupations. More Information, Including Links to O*NET Learn more about substance abuse, behavioral disorder, and mental health counselors by visiting additional resources, including O*NET, a source on key characteristics of workers and occupations.

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