Mental Health Professions

Eight professions diagnose and treat mental health disorders, but they differ in training length, cost, whether they can prescribe, and where they can practice. Use this handout to compare the paths and decide which fits your goals.

At a glance:

Profession	Degree required	Typical time after bachelor's	Prescribes?	Median salary
Psychiatrist	M.D. or D.O.	~8 years (med school + residency)	Yes	~$282,000
Clinical Psychologist	Ph.D. or Psy.D.	5–7 years + postdoc hours	No (a few states allow it with extra training)	~$100,600
School Psychologist	Ed.S. (or doctorate)	~3 years, including internship	No	~$96,000
Licensed Psychological Associate (KY only)	Master's in Clinical Psychology	~2 years + supervised practice	No	Not tracked separately
Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)	MSW	1–4 years + ~2 years supervised practice	No	~$60,300
Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse	BSN (RN); MSN or DNP for nurse practitioner	2–4+ years beyond BSN for NP	Nurse practitioners only	~$97,600 (RN); ~$132,300 (NP)
Licensed Professional Counselor (LPCC in KY)	60-hour master's in counseling	2–3 years + 4,000 supervised hours in KY	No	~$59,400
Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT)	Master's in MFT	~2 years + 1,500–3,000 supervised hours	No	~$66,900

** Salaries are U.S. national median annual wages from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2025, where available. Some figures represent broader occupational categories rather than specific licenses. Psychiatrist salary estimates may come from other sources. Actual pay varies by setting, region, experience, and specialization.*

Psychiatrist

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor (M.D. or D.O.) who specializes in mental health, including substance use disorders. Because they are physicians, psychiatrists can assess both the mental and physical sides of psychological problems and can prescribe medication. Much of their time goes to medication management.

How to become one:

1. Earn a bachelor's degree, including the biology, chemistry, math, psych sciences, and physics courses medical schools require.
2. Earn a medical degree (~4 years).
3. Complete a psychiatry residency (~4 years).
4. Obtain a medical license.
5. Become board certified.

Licensed Clinical/Counseling Psychologist

Clinical/counseling psychologists assess, diagnose, treat, and prevent mental disorders. They often work in medical settings but are not medical doctors and, in most states, do not prescribe. You can specialize by age group (adult or child) or subfield, such as neuropsychology, health psychology/behavioral medicine, gerontology, or addiction psychology. Some work as professors (teaching, research, supervising trainees) or as full-time researchers at universities and academic medical centers.

What sets clinical /counseling psychologists apart: assessment. Clinical/counseling and school psychologists receive the most extensive training of any of these professions in psychological assessment. This includes administering, scoring, and interpreting standardized tests of intelligence, personality, psychopathology, and neuropsychological functioning to inform diagnosis and treatment. Psychiatrists, social workers, counselors, MFTs, and nurses assess clients mainly through interviews and screening measures.

How to become one:

1. Earn an undergraduate degree in psychology or a related field.
2. Check whether your target programs want the GRE. Many no longer require it or do not consider it at all, so check each program.
3. Earn a master's degree, work in a research lab, or go straight into an APA-accredited doctoral program.
4. Earn a Ph.D. or Psy.D. in clinical psychology (typically 5–7 years, including a one-year APA-accredited internship).
5. Gain additional postdoctoral supervised hours for licensure.
6. Pass the EPPP (national licensing exam) and any state licensure exams.

Ph.D. vs. Psy.D.

	Ph.D.	Psy.D.
Focus	Research-based; prepares you to be a clinician, professor, researcher, or a mix	Practitioner-based; most graduates provide direct services in applied settings
Requirements	Master's thesis, comprehensive exams or midpoint project, dissertation	Some programs require a dissertation, some do not
Cost	Typically fully funded (tuition paid) plus an assistantship stipend, commonly about $20,000–$35,000 per year	Usually you pay tuition and fees (~$11,000–$55,000 per year); a few offer funding Can lead to significant debt if not funded
Acceptance rate	Often under 5% for clinical programs	Higher overall, but accredited, funded programs are very competitive

Clinical psychology (Ph.D.) has one of the lowest doctoral acceptance rates of any psychology subfield. Strong programs often admit fewer than 10 of 300+ applicants.

What makes you a stronger applicant:

Most important:

- **Research fit with a potential research mentor** (the single biggest factor)
- Research experience: working in labs, conference presentations, peer-reviewed publications
- GPA (and GRE scores, only where a program still requires them)
- Letters of recommendation

Less important but still considered:

- Relevant clinical experience, ideally tied to the lab's focus (e.g., working at Hope Harbor when applying to a lab that studies sexual trauma)
- Foundational coursework: biobehavioral or behavioral neuroscience, cognitive or learning, history of psychology, social psychology, abnormal psychology

Programs also weigh work and volunteer history, your statement of academic and career goals, and interviews, which nearly all programs still require.

School Psychologist

School psychologists help K–12 students with educational, behavioral, and developmental problems that affect learning. Typical work includes assessments for special education,

consulting with teachers and families, counseling students, and crisis response. The entry-level degree is a specialist degree (Ed.S.), not a doctorate. A doctorate in school psychology opens additional options, such as independent practice or academia.

How to become one:

1. Earn a bachelor's degree in psychology or a related field.
2. Complete a NASP-approved specialist program: at least 60 graduate hours, typically about 3 years. **At WKU:** the Department of Psychology's Ed.S. in School Psychology is NASP-approved and 66 hours. It admits a cohort of roughly 10–12 students and ends with a full-time paid internship in the third year.
3. Complete a 1,200-hour internship, at least 600 hours of it in a school.
4. Pass the Praxis School Psychologist exam and earn certification from your state's education board (in Kentucky, the EPSB). The optional Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) credential from NASP makes it easier to work in other states.

Licensed Psychological Associate (Kentucky)

A Licensed Psychological Associate (LPA) is a master's-level psychology credential that lets you provide psychological services in Kentucky. It is a faster route into practice than a doctorate, but the designation is specific to Kentucky and most likely will not transfer to other states.

How to become one:

1. Earn a bachelor's degree in psychology or a related field.
2. Complete a Master's in Clinical Psychology (e.g., the WKU Department of Psychology's clinical M.A., a 2-year, 48-hour program), including at least 600 supervised practicum and internship hours.
3. Pass the EPPP, the same national licensing exam psychologists take, to become a Licensed Psychological Associate (LPA).
4. Practice under the supervision of a licensed psychologist for 2 full-time years.
5. Apply to practice autonomously as a **Licensed Psychological Practitioner (LPP)**. This requires 60 graduate hours (WKU students can extend the M.A. to 60 hours), an EPPP score at the level required for licensed psychologists, and Kentucky's oral and jurisprudence exams.

If you may want to live or work outside Kentucky, weigh this carefully, or compare it with the LPC or LCSW paths, which exist in every state (though each state sets its own requirements).

Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)

LCSWs are a clinical specialty within social work, helping clients with mental and emotional health concerns. Specializations include mental health, substance use, public health, school social work, medical social work, marriage counseling, and child and family therapy.

How to become one — three main paths:

1. Earn a bachelor's degree. A BSW from a CSWE-accredited program qualifies you for advanced standing.
2. Earn an MSW (some states also accept a Ph.D. or DSW). **At WKU:** the Department of Social Work's MSW is offered in Bowling Green and online, with an emphasis on rural practice. The traditional program is 60 hours for students with a bachelor's in any field. The Advanced Standing program is 30 hours (one year full-time) for students with a CSWE-accredited BSW earned within the past 7 years.
3. Pass the ASWB master's exam to become a Certified Social Worker (CSW) in Kentucky.
4. Complete 2 years of full-time supervised clinical practice (or 3 years part-time), including 200 hours of documented supervision.
5. Pass the ASWB clinical exam to become an LCSW.

These are Kentucky's steps. Other states follow a similar sequence, though titles and hour requirements vary.

Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse

Psychiatric-mental health nurses assess and care for individuals and families with psychiatric disorders. There are two levels. Registered nurses (RNs) work in psychiatric settings. Psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioners (PMHNPs) have graduate training and can diagnose, prescribe medication, and conduct psychotherapy. Many PMHNPs own private practices or consult with groups, communities, legislators, and corporations.

How to become one:

1. Earn a bachelor's degree in nursing (~4 years) and pass the NCLEX to become an RN.
2. To prescribe, earn an MSN or DNP in a PMHNP program (2–4 additional years, including at least 500 supervised clinical hours).
3. Pass the PMHNP board certification exam.

RNs can also earn a separate RN-level certification in psychiatric-mental health nursing (PMH-BC). It requires 2 years as an RN, 2,000 hours of psychiatric-mental health practice, and 30 hours of continuing education within the past 3 years. This certification does not allow prescribing.

Already majoring in psychology? You can still pursue psychiatric nursing. Some universities offer graduate-entry nursing pathways for students who hold a bachelor’s degree in another field. Vanderbilt University, for example, offers a Master of Nursing Prespecialty pathway followed by specialty training in psychiatric-mental health nursing. These programs first prepare students for RN licensure and then provide advanced practice training. Admission prerequisites and program length vary, so consult the university’s current requirements.

Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)

Licensed mental health counselors work with distressed and traumatized clients across a range of mental health issues. They see individuals or groups, sometimes focusing on a population such as college students or children.

How to become one:

1. Earn a bachelor's degree.
2. Earn a master's degree in counseling (2–3 years; Kentucky requires at least 60 graduate hours and a 600-hour practicum or internship). **At WKU:** the Department of Counseling's MAE in Counseling is CACREP-accredited, 60 hours, and meets Kentucky's LPCC education requirements. Its Clinical Mental Health Counseling concentration is offered in person or online (online students attend two on-campus skills residencies). A Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling concentration is also available. Students gain hands-on experience at WKU's on-campus Talley Family Counseling Center.
3. Complete supervised post-master's experience. In Kentucky you work as a Licensed Professional Counselor Associate (LPCA) and complete 4,000 hours, including 1,600 hours of direct counseling. Other states typically require 2,000–3,000 hours.
4. Pass the national counseling exam (NCE or NCMHCE) and earn licensure. Kentucky's title is Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC).

Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT)

MFTs help resolve issues between family members: couples, siblings, parents and children, and stepparents and stepchildren.

How to become one:

1. Earn a bachelor's degree.
2. Earn a master's degree (~2 years).
3. Complete 1,500–3,000 supervised post-master's hours.
4. Earn licensure.

Next steps

Licensing requirements differ by state, so check the licensing board for any state where you plan to practice. Questions about any of these paths are welcome during office hours.