



PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING FACT SHEET

1. What is the difference between a counselor, a psychologist and a psychiatrist?

The differences in these professions can be summarized by differences in education focus and degrees. Professional counselors have a graduate degree in counseling. A master's degree is the entry level requirement. While counselors can diagnose and treat mental disorders, counselors focus on wellness, career development, client empowerment and client strengths as opposed to psychopathology. Counselors are also experts in addressing the needs of different cultures. Psychologists have a graduate degree in psychology, and licensed psychologists typically have a degree in clinical, counseling or school psychology. Of all the mental health professions, psychologists are the best trained in conducting research. Psychiatrists are medical doctors who have usually completed a residency in psychiatry. Their niche is prescribing psychotropic drugs.

2. What is the difference between a counselor and a social worker?

As mentioned above, counselors have a graduate degree in counseling, usually a master's degree. Social workers have a degree in social work, and the entry level is a bachelor's degree. For a social worker to provide the types of services professional counselors do, a master's degree in social work is required, typically with a degree in clinical social work. Social workers are trained to assist individuals with more basic needs than counselors. Social workers are thoroughly trained in case management skills to assist families in meeting their food and shelter needs. If you are familiar with Maslow's hierarchy, social workers are trained to focus on the lower levels of the hierarchy, and counselors are trained to focus on the higher end of the hierarchy. However, in practice, many social workers do counseling and help individuals with personal issues even though counselors get much more training in this area.

3. What types of degrees and certifications do counselors need?

All professional counselors need a master's or doctoral degree in counseling, but specific counseling degree focus and certifications depends on the specialty. School counselors need to be certified/licensed by a state education department to work in a public school. Counselors working in mental health settings (mental health centers, college counseling centers, hospitals, substance abuse centers, etc.) need to be licensed in their state as a professional counselor. Rehabilitation counselors typically need to be a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor, especially if they work in the traditional setting of a state Office for Vocational Rehabilitation.

4. Can counselors prescribe medicine?

No, counselors do not prescribe medications.

5. Is counseling covered by health insurance?

Counseling is covered by health insurance in most states. To be reimbursed, the visit must be with a licensed professional counselor. If the state is a two-tier license state, the counselor will need to be licensed at the higher independence practice level.

6. Why would I see a counselor instead of a psychologist or psychiatrist?

Counselors charge less than psychologists or psychiatrists and provide a level of quality service just as high. That is why some health insurance companies prefer counselors (and social workers) over psychologists. Counselors are also experts in helping individuals discover their career path. Counseling is focused on discovering the client's strengths and does not focus on labels, like psychotic or manic-depressive. Counselors focus on the client as a person, not a diagnosis.

7. What are some of the different areas of counseling services?

The most common specialties are school counseling, mental health counseling, college counseling, couples and family counseling, rehabilitation counseling, career counseling and substance abuse counseling.

8. Where can I find a counselor?

It depends on what the issue is and what kind of counselor you need. If your child is having a problem, the child's school can tell you the name of the school counselor. The same goes for college. If you want a private practitioner, an online therapist site - like [Psychology Today's Therapy Directory](#) - will list professional counselors in your area.

9. Can I go to counseling with someone?

Counseling is very flexible – it can be done solo, with a partner, with one or more friends, or with family members depending on the issue. Counselors are also trained to conduct group counseling - usually with seven to 12 people focusing on a similar issue, which can be very cost effective.

10. Is what I say in counseling private and confidential?

Confidentiality is a cornerstone of counseling and all HIPAA privacy rules apply. Counselors do honor confidentiality with exceptions for minors in danger and for clients who show potential to harm themselves or others (i.e. we break confidentiality to protect life).

11. How do I know which type of counseling I need?

Have an initial consultation with any counselor and they can help you think through the best specialty for your issue.

12. Is counseling therapy? Are the words interchangeable?

No. We prefer the term professional counseling to counseling since counseling by itself is generic (i.e. camp counseling, financial counseling, vacation counseling, etc.). Professional counseling has a specific scope of practice granted by the state. Therapy and therapist are unregulated terms and more difficult to define. In order to be considered a professional counselor, education and certifications are required, and because of those requirements, counseling differs from the broader "therapist" term greatly.

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