

**What Do All Those Letters After a Professional's Name Mean?**  
**Part 2: Psychologists, Therapists, and Social Workers**

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Choosing a mental health professional is complicated and a understanding of credentials is important since early intervention with a *qualified* professional is still the best predictor of a good outcome. Mental health professionals have a range of credentials and licenses. In this article, I outline practitioner credentials which qualifies them **to work independently** with patients. Not all practitioners in mental health have a college education so your discussion with them regarding their educational background is very important.

### Psychologists

The American Psychological Association recognizes the Doctorate as the terminal degree required to claim the title "Psychologist". There are three main types of "psychologists":

- **Clinical** - are trained in the widest range of mental health issues with more emphasis on serious mental illness than the other two types of psychologists
- **Counseling** - have more training in issues relating to employment and general life events and transitions
- **School** - focus their training on child, adolescent, and family issues and primarily have training in assessment and school-based interventions. (Schools allow the use of the title "School Psychologist" to anyone holding that job title within the schools who has a *Masters in School Psychology or higher*)

### Ph.D. - Doctor of Philosophy

- Completed/earned 4-year university degree (bachelors)
- Some Ph.D. programs require a Masters degree prior to admission, but there is an exception in Clinical Psychology programs which typically award the Masters after the completion of certain requirements for the Ph.D.
- Course of study averaging 7 years in the US is required to be awarded the Ph.D. from an APA-Approved program. Training includes a wide range of advanced coursework in assessment, research, ethics, biological basis for behavior, developmental, social, cognitive and learning areas of psychology (taught by both practitioners and experimental/research psychologists), as well as supervised practice (a minimum of over 2000 hours before internship), a year-long internship (full time practice within a setting like a hospital, prison, mental health center, or other facility with a range of patients and supervisors), and a dissertation (a large independent supervised original research project).

### Ed.D. - Doctor of Education

- Completed/earned 4-year university degree (bachelors)
- Counseling and School psychologists from university based programs do a large independent supervised research project called a dissertation as the final requirement (following years of advanced coursework and practice supervision)
- A Counseling psychologist in most states must also complete an APA-Approved year of internship training. They also receive a year of training prior to the award of their doctorate but unlike Clinical and Counseling psychologists this is not a uniform requirement for the School Psychology doctorate.

### Psy.D. - Doctor of Psychology

- Distinction is that the Psy.D. does not include a focus on conducting research.
- Within most Psy.D. programs the candidate does a "project" which equates to a long paper (not a dissertation) as their final requirement for the degree.
- Must complete the same supervised practice and internship requirements as the Ph.D. in order to be licensed in the U.S. and Canada.

### Masters' Prepared Therapists

- have completed a masters degree
- specialize in a particular area following the completion of their bachelors (4 year degree)
- approximately 1-2 years following the completion of the bachelors degree.
- post graduate courses are within a single subject area (psychology, counseling, biology, etc).

The most common masters level credentials used in the mental health field are (but not limited to):

**M.A. - Master of Arts**

**M.Ed. - Master of Education**

**M.S. - Master of Science**

**M.S.W. - Master of Social Work** (LMSW – indicates they are licensed)

**M.F.T – Marriage and Family Therapist** (LMFT – indicates they are licensed)

**L.P.C. - Licensed Professional Counselor.**

**L.C.S.W. – Licensed Clinical Social Worker**

**M.Div. - Master's of Divinity** (a degree that ministers get - some of whom are pastoral counselors)

**Certification** - training offering the practitioner training in a sub-area within their broader professional field; most require advanced degrees to qualify for participation.

**Degree** - training which was part of a structured program from a recognized university.

**License** - a permit to operate or claim some expertise under the laws of many governments granted by application to the state government. Most states have Boards which set standards, examine, and police the professionals seeking a license. ts certain practices are restricted to those holding the appropriate license.

Ask your mental health professional about their experience or certifications addressing the issues with which you need help. Your first appointment is an evaluation and should include a discussion regarding goals, anticipated length of treatment, and a discussion of values that are important to you. A first appointment does not commit you to that professional. An important component of treatment is the relationship between you and your therapist. You must feel confident working through your issues with a trusted therapist.

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