

So, you want to be a counselor/therapist?

Before you consider degree options for you, let's first discuss whether this profession would be a good fit for you. Therapists are professionals who engage in the diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders. Many people will say they want to be a therapist because they might be the person that everyone comes to for help/advice and support. Perhaps they are a good listener. Perhaps they also have a lot of empathy. These are great traits to have, but do not necessarily equate to a successful therapist.

One of the greatest misconceptions about therapists is that they give direct advice. Therapists are trained in diagnosing and treatment mental health disorders and a range of problems that interfere with someone's day to day life. They are specifically trained *not* to give out direct advice, as direct advice is not very effective in creating lasting change for clients. Instead, they use a variety of techniques to help guide the client into making healthier decisions for themselves. They remain neutral (meaning, they don't weigh in with their personal thoughts or opinions) and typically do not share much about themselves (in order to keep the focus on the client).

In addition, many individuals want to become a therapist because they have problems of their own that they want to figure out. Although it is fine to have your own, personal struggles when training to be a therapist, the training is focused on helping others, not helping yourself. An effective therapist will be able to remove their own experiences from the therapy experience in order to focus on their client and best help their client. An effective therapist is aware of their own experiences and biases and how that may impact their work with their client, and so they must work even harder to ensure that these biases don't negatively impact the work with their client.

Here are some qualities that would make someone more successful in becoming a therapist:

- Empathy and listening skills
 - As stated above, these are naturally important. However, too much empathy can be problematic if you begin to constantly think about all of the sad/upsetting things your clients have told you about outside of session. Good therapists have the ability to set their work aside and focus on other aspects of their life when they are not seeing clients.
- Organizational skills
 - Being a therapist involves keeping track of a number of clients, documentation, appointments, etc.
- Ability to set boundaries
 - When you are a therapist, you have to learn to set firm boundaries with others so that you don't risk "burning out." Setting boundaries means doing things like being firm with appointment times, not taking on more than you can handle, being comfortable saying "no", telling clients you can't see them outside of your available times, etc.
- Self-care skills
 - Being a therapist can be mentally exhausting. You are spending the day being very in-tune with your clients and spending a lot of that time being highly empathic. You hear some very distressing and traumatic things that have happened. To be an effective therapist, you need to know how to take care of yourself outside of your job. Taking

care of yourself might mean having a good support network of people, doing fun things outside of work, engaging in relaxation techniques, etc.

- Mental health stability & self-awareness
 - Even though it is okay to have your own problems if you are a therapist, you should be well aware of the impact these problems might have on your clients and get help of your own if you need to. Being as stable as possible for your clients is necessary if you want to provide the best care. The best thing you can do for your clients is being self-aware and understanding the biases and background that you might bring to the therapeutic relationship and the effect it might have on your clients.
- Ethical standards & confidentiality
 - Being a therapist means you hear a lot of fascinating things about lots of different people. You can't go around and talk about all of these things with everyone you know just because they are interesting. You have to protect your clients' confidentiality and your clients' secrets.
- Critical thinking skills
 - Being a therapist involves having to constantly stay attuned to small changes in what your clients might be telling you, and trying to constantly figure out why your clients might be saying/behaving in the way that they are. It is a constant hypothesis-testing situation, in which you may have hypotheses as to why your clients are engaging in certain behaviors and then use therapy to test out your hypotheses.
- Tolerance
 - As a therapist, you will hear things that your clients have done that you may or may not morally/ethically agree with. Your clients are coming to you to get a neutral perspective that is non-judgmental, so it is your job to ensure you are acting in such a way regardless of how you feel about what they did. Making a client feel shame and embarrassment for something will only make them feel worse and could create more harm for the patient.
- Ability to handle high-stress situations
 - Depending on the population you end up working with, you may have exposure to high-crisis situations with clients. For example, a client who you have worked with for some time who recently attempted suicide. Keeping a level head and helping problems solve and support the client is essential. Successful therapists can effectively manage these high-stress/crisis situations in order to best help their clients.
- Flexibility
 - Good therapists will challenge their own assumptions over time. They will have the ability to reflect on their own behavior and actions and be able to identify places where they might be stuck with a particular client, places where they may want to change their own behavior to better help their clients, and they will adapt to new findings and techniques in the field.

OK, so you've read this far and still think a therapist career would be a good fit for you. Now let's discuss the many options available to you. Many people do not understand that there are LOTS of career choices that all produce an end result of working with people as a counselor/therapist. This guide is meant to outline each type of degree you can get, what it stands for, pros/cons to each, and what you might need to do to get into that career.

First, these are the careers/degrees covered in this document:

Psychiatrist - MD

Psychologist – Doctorate level

- a. Clinical Psychologist - PhD
- b. Clinical Psychologist - PsyD
- c. Counseling Psychologist - PhD
- d. Educational and Counseling Psychologist - EdD

Masters Level Counselors

- e. Masters Limited Licensed Psychologist – MA
- f. Social Work - MSW
- g. Marriage and Family Therapist - LMFT
- h. Licensed Mental Health Counselor - LMHC
- i. Licensed Professional Counselor - LPC
- j. School Counselor
- k. Applied Behavior Analyst (ABA—Masters)

Psychiatrist

Degree:

MD, Psychiatry Specialty

Schooling Required post-bachelors:

- Doctor of Medicine (MD) – 4 years
- Psychiatry Residency – 4 years
- A state medical license and board certification

What does a psychiatrist do?

- Psychiatrists are medical doctors.
- They assess and treat mental illness using a medical model, and often treat mental illness using biological interventions (e.g., medications). They can prescribe medications.
- Rarely do psychiatrists have training in “talk therapy,” but this is dependent on their residency training program and doing therapy is dependent on the job they end up working in, but most employers do not want psychiatrists to do “talk therapy” with patients.

In which settings does a psychiatrist work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hospitals, government offices, private practices, mental health clinics, research, Psychiatry residency training programs
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly paid and in demand profession • Strong general medical knowledge • Certain privileges earned
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychologists are slowly getting prescription privileges and this could strongly influence the role of psychiatrists • Cost (high student debt) • Competitive – for medical school AND residency • Time to degree • Jobs typically involve treatment with meds versus “talk therapy”
Average Salary in Michigan:	\$234,887/ year

Clinical Psychologist - PhD

Degree:	PhD
Schooling Required post-bachelors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Clinical Psychology (5-7 years) • A state psychologist license
What does a clinical psychologist with a PhD do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus in graduate school is on learning to conduct research to understand mental illness. • Training in working with all populations across age range, types of disorders, mild to severe disorders. • They are trained in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Research (the focus) ○ Therapy ○ Assessment - administering tests and other assessment tools to measure and observe a client's behavior to arrive at a diagnosis and guide treatment • A dissertation is required and is usually a large scale, independent research project that is conducted and written.
In which settings does a clinical psychologist with a PhD work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universities as professors, medical centers, hospitals, schools, private practice, government/VA centers, business

Pros

- Least restrictive degree for doing a wide-range of professions (except prescribing medication)
- No restrictions on professional license – can open one's own private practice because no restrictions on insurances that one can bill
- Low cost (little to no student debt because students will get assistantships – work study programs where they work in graduate school to pay for their tuition)

Cons

- Highly competitive
- Highly selective (only 4-5 spots per program with hundreds of applicants)
- Time to degree

Average Salary in Michigan:

\$104,758/year

Clinical Psychologist - PsyD

Degree:

PsyD

Schooling Required post-bachelors:

- Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) in Clinical Psychology (4-6 years)
- A state psychologist license

What does a clinical psychologist with a PsyD do?

- Focus in graduate school is on treatment of mental illness.
- Training in working with all populations across age range, types of disorders, mild to severe disorders.
- They are trained in:
 - Therapy (Focus)
 - Assessment - administering tests and other assessment tools to measure and observe a client's behavior to arrive at a diagnosis and guide treatment
 - Consuming research – understanding and reading research, some programs may require small, independent projects
- A dissertation is required and is generally a large literature review on a relevant topic in mental illness.

In which settings does a clinical psychologist with a PsyD work?

- PsyD programs as supervisors/instructors, medical centers, hospitals, schools, private practice, government/VA centers, business. Do not typically work in university settings.

Pros

- Good training if some programs (consider the faculty student ratio and reputation of the program)
- Generally can do anything someone with a PhD can do aside from working as a professor at a research/teaching university
- No restrictions on professional license – can open one's own private practice because no restrictions on insurances that one can bill
- Less competitive programs to enter than PhD (but more competitive than master's degrees)

Cons

- Excessively high cost relative to salary (median debt from grad school \$146,000 as of versus Ph.D debt of \$78,000 as of 2016)
- Time to degree
- Lots of programs exist to make money – need to be extra careful when researching programs

Average Salary in Michigan:

\$86,000/year

Counseling Psychologist - PhD

Degree:

PhD

Schooling Required post-bachelors:

- Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Counseling Psychology (4-6 years)
- A state psychologist license

What does a counseling psychologist do?

- Focus in graduate school is on helping improve an individual's personal and interpersonal functioning in life.
- Training involves across all ages, but generally focus is on adults and healthy populations versus persons with clinical disorders
- Training typically involves treating those with less severe mental illness or those who do not have a mental illness but still want counseling/guidance to improve themselves or their life.
- Training has a strong identity/diversity/multicultural component.
- They are trained in:
 - Therapy (Focus)
 - Assessment - administering tests and other assessment tools to measure and observe a client's behavior to arrive at a diagnosis and guide treatment; Note, however, that there is often less training in this domain than in clinical PhD or PsyD programs.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Research – will learn to conduct independent research ● A dissertation is required and is usually an independent research project that is conducted and written.
In which settings does a counseling psychologist work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● College counseling centers, private/group practice, schools
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Less competitive than Clinical PhD ● Better training in multicultural issues
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Less training in assessment/research may limit types of professions one can do ● Less specialist training; less focus on more serious clinical disorders ● No restrictions on professional license – can open one's own private practice because no restrictions on insurances that one can bill
Average Salary in Michigan:	\$63,000/ year

Educational and Counseling Psychologist - EdD

Degree:	EdD
Schooling Required post-bachelors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Doctor of Education (EdD) in Counseling Psychology (4-6 years) ● A state psychologist license
What does a counseling psychologist do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Similar to counseling psychologist training (helping improve an individual's personal and interpersonal functioning in life), but the degree is housed within the university's Education department. ● Training involves across all ages, and some programs have a child/adolescent track and an adult track. ● Training typically involves treating those with less severe mental illness or those who do not have a mental illness but still want counseling/guidance to improve themselves or their life. ● They are trained in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Therapy (Focus) ○ Assessment - administering tests and other assessment tools to measure and observe a client's behavior to arrive at a diagnosis and guide treatment; Note, however, that there is often less training in this domain than in clinical PhD or PsyD programs.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Research – will learn to conduct independent research ● A dissertation is required and is usually an independent research project that is conducted and written.
In which settings does a counseling psychologist work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School counseling centers, private/group practice, human service agencies, government/industry positions
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Less competitive than Clinical PhD ● Exposure to education-based curriculum (since housed within the university's Education program)
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Some states may not recognize degree as a practicing psychologist – may have some restrictions (other states may have no restrictions on professional license) ●
Average Salary in Michigan:	\$65,000/ year

Masters Limited Licensed Psychologist (LLP) - MA

Degree:	MA
Schooling Required post-bachelors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Master of Arts (EdD) in Psychology (2-3 years) ● A state limited psychologist license
What does a Limited Licensed Psychologist do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All depends on the area of specialization ● Works under the supervision of a (Ph. D.) ● Evaluate, diagnose, and treat mental disorders, addiction problems, anxiety and emotional disorders. ● Administer Psychological test ● May need to assist in insurance billing
In which settings does a Limited Licensed Psychologist work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clinical, private office, community health centers, corrections systems, and in-patient facilities ● Might work with attorneys and other members of the legal system
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Only a 2-year master's program, so little time in school
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Having to work under the supervision of a Ph. D
Average Salary in Michigan:	\$46,00-\$96,000/ year

You might also consider:

Specialist Degree in School Psychology

Masters in Counseling (School of Education)

Masters in Social Work (clinical practice focus to become a LCSW)

Masters in Applied Behavior Analysis