



Mental  
Health  
Careers

# Mental Health Careers Take Off

The topic of mental health and the need for more of it is one of the few areas left with bi-partisan support in the U.S.

In March of 2022, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced nearly \$35 million in funding to help strengthen and expand mental health availability. This was on top of the American Rescue Plan providing \$9.2 million.

This is just some of the money being made available for mental health and the demand for people to work in these jobs is growing exponentially.

In 2022, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projected that employment for substance abuse, behavioral disorder and mental health counselors will grow 23% from 2020 to 2030, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. They predict that there will be 41,000 new openings per year on average over the decade.

## TYPES OF CAREERS

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) divides mental health careers into general categories that include those that provide assessment and therapy, those that prescribe and monitor medication and “other.”

Some of the associated job titles are:

- **Psychologists:** Professionals



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with doctoral degrees who evaluate mental health, make diagnoses and provide individual and group therapy.

- **Counselors, clinicians and therapists:** Professionals with masters degrees who can evaluate mental health and provide therapy.

- **Clinical social workers:** Professionals with masters degrees who can evaluate mental health and who provide therapy within the framework of specific training programs.

- **Psychiatrists:** Licensed medical doctors with psychiatric training who can diag-

nose mental health conditions, prescribe and monitor medicine and provide therapy.

- **Psychiatric or mental health nurse practitioners:** Licensed nurses who specialize in psychiatry and can provide assessment, diagnosis, therapy and prescribe and monitor medication. The latter varies by state.

- **Certified peer specialists:** These professionals have a lived experience with either a mental health condition or a substance use disorder and can provide support, mentoring and guidance.

- **Social workers:** These professionals with a master’s degree provide case management, placement services and support for healthy living.

- **Pastoral counselors:** These clergy members have training in clinical pastoral education and can diagnose and provide counseling.

## WORK ENVIRONMENTS

The Bureau of Labor Statistics says that mental health professional work in a wide variety of settings including mental health centers, community health centers, prisons, schools and private

practice.

In recent years, private businesses have begun hiring mental health professionals.

Most mental health jobs are full time, though private practices allow for flexibility. At hospitals and residential facilities, they may be required to work evenings, nights and weekends.

For those interested in mental health careers, most jobs require at least a bachelor’s degree and many require master’s or doctoral degrees. Some of the jobs also require internships before a person is allowed to practice.



# The Psychologist's Role

For people who want to help others, who are curious about why people behave the way they do and how they can overcome mental health challenges, the occupation of clinical psychologist can be an attractive one.

Clinical psychologists help their patients discover whether they have existing or potential mental disorders. They conduct observation, interviews and tests. They work with patients on programs of treatment.

According to All Psychology Schools, clinical psychologists will perform the following job duties:

- Identify psychological, behavioral or emotional issues and disorders.
- Develop and implement treatment plans and therapeutic processes.
- Help patients define goals and create action plans to achieve personal, social, educational and vocational growth and change.
- Monitor progress on an ongoing basis.
- Teach classes.
- Conduct and publish research.

## BECOMING A PSYCHOLOGIST

Anyone who wants to become a psychologist will need to commit to formal education. Any four-year degree is acceptable, though one in education, sociology or psychology is considered good preparation. The next step is to receive a master's degree in psychology as a minimum. Many go on to earn doctoral degrees in psychology as well.

Most psychologists need to be licensed and obtain certification,



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though this varies by state. State requirements can be found at the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards.

In addition, the American Board of Professional Psychology awards specialty certification in 15 areas of psychology such as clinical health psychology, couple and family psychology and rehabilitation psychology.

Most jobs require some experience which can be obtained through an internship, often before being licensed.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists the following skills as important for anyone who wants to be a clinical psychologist:

- Analytical skills.
- Communication skills.

- Integrity.
- Interpersonal skills.
- Observational skills.
- Patience.
- Problem-solving skills.

## JOB OUTLOOK

As of 2020, there were 178,900 psychologists in the United States. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that over the next ten years, that will grow by eight percent.

Much of the growth is expected because the COVID-19 pandemic is taking a toll on people's mental health, thus increasing the demand for services. There is also expected to be growth in the use of psychological services in schools, hospitals, mental health centers and social service agen-

cies, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

More research has created an increased awareness of the connection between mental health and learning. It has increased the demand for school psychologists who can assist with socio-emotional learning.

Likewise, commercial organizations are expected to continue to use organizational psychologists for job recruitment and retention, training and human resource needs.

Many psychologists have private practices where they set their own hours and others work as independent consultants. Evening and weekend shifts are common for those in private practice and those who work in hospitals and healthcare facilities.

# Recreational Therapists

In the field of mental health professionals, there are those that recognize many people need creative therapeutic methods to heal and function at higher levels.

These are people who turn to the specialized fields of recreational therapy to treat their patients.

Recreational therapists include those who specialize in music, art, sports, games, animals, dance, movement and drama. There are even those who specialize in such areas as aquatics or aromatherapy. They often help patients with not only mental and emotional issues, but those with physical illnesses and disabilities as well.

According to All Psychology Schools, these therapists use recreational activities to “help patients reduce stress and anxiety, combat depression and recover motor schools and reasoning functionality.” They also help provide access to community resources and teach them how to use community facilities in a positive manner.

## BECOMING A RECREATIONAL THERAPIST

Those who want to become recreational therapists start by getting a bachelor’s degree in therapeutic recreation or in



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recreation and fitness. These programs offer training in assessment, treatment, program planning and intervention. They usually require classes in human anatomy, the use of assistive devices and medical and psychiatric terminology.

There are also programs and degrees for those who want to focus on a specific area such as music therapy or arts therapy.

The National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification offers a credential for those who have com-

pleted a 480-hour supervised internship and passed a written exam, but this certification is not mandatory in most states.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, key qualities that recreational therapists need to have are:

- Compassion
- Leadership skills
- Listening skills
- Patience
- Resourcefulness
- Speaking skills

## JOB OUTLOOK

The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the recreational therapy field will grow by 10 percent over this decade.

There are several factors behind this growth. First, the U.S. population is aging and recreational therapists are able to treat age-related injuries and illnesses such as a stroke, Alzheimer’s disease and mobility-related injuries. Aside from the physical, recreational therapists can help seniors remain social and active in their communities which can lead to greater independence later in life.

The U.S. also continues to experience a growth in the number of people with chronic conditions such as diabetes and obesity. Recreational therapists can help people manage their conditions and help them adjust recreational activities to accommodate any limitations they might have.

Another area of growth comes from the increasing number of veterans who are managing service-related conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or loss of limbs. Recreational therapists work with veterans to help them reintegrate into their communities and adjust to physical, social and cognitive changes they have experienced.



# Peer Workers Offer Support

Not all mental health workers are degreed mental health professionals. Sometimes life can teach lessons that education can't.

Many people with lived experience of mental illness, trauma, substance abuse, addiction, sexual abuse or homelessness, are able to provide understanding and help based on their experiences.

## A NEW ROLE

Peer support has become an evidence-based practice in the mental health field, something that goes by many different names and can be a part of many different settings. Peer supporters, according to Mental Health America, encourage and assist others with long-term recovery by offering emotional support, sharing knowledge, teaching skills, providing practical assistance and connecting people with resources. They are sometimes able to provide advocacy, education, mentoring and motivation.

These professionals have become increasingly important and present in community-based organizations, often leading them. They play a growing role in helping people recover from and live with mental or substance abuse disorders.

The field was born in the



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1970s out of the self-help movement, often led by people who suffered abuse in psychiatric hospitals.

Mental Health America says that there are now more than 24,000 peer support workers in the United States. It is recognized by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) as a legitimate practice, which has paved the way for more than 41 states to offer Medicaid reimburse-

ment for peer services.

According to SAMHSA, peer support workers may perform the following activities:

- Advocating for people in recovery
- Sharing resources and building skills
- Building community and relationships
- Leading recovery groups
- Mentoring and setting goals
- Providing services or training

• Supervising other peer workers

- Developing resources
- Administering programs or agencies
- Educating the public and policymakers.

## CORE COMPETENCIES

It is not enough to simply share a condition with someone to be a peer support worker, even if that is the foundation. SAMHSA worked with subject matter experts to

research and identify core competencies for support workers.

Core competencies are, according to SAMHSA, “clusters of the knowledge, skills and attitudes a person needs to have to successfully perform a role or job.”

Those mental health professionals who worked with SAMHSA identified key principles that directed the development of the competencies for support workers. They are principles that peer support workers need to have. They include:

- Recovery oriented: Peer workers hold out hope and partner with those they serve, embracing multiple pathways to recovery.

- Person-centered: The person in recovery is the one who directs the services they need and the goals that are set.

- Voluntary: Peer workers are consultants and partners — they don't dictate how the person they are working with will recover. Peer choice is crucial and participation in peer recovery support is always voluntary.

- Relationship-focused: The peer worker will form a relationship with the peer they are helping. It needs to be respectful, trusting, empathetic, collaborative and mutual.

- Trauma-informed: Peer support workers will use a strength-based framework to create opportunities for survivors and rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

# Psychiatric Pharmacists

One of the fastest growing mental health fields is that of psychiatric pharmacy.

Psychiatric pharmacists provide medication therapy management for patients with mental health disorders and illnesses. They also help treat opioid and substance use disorders.

## WHAT IS DRIVING THE DEMAND?

According to the Bureau of Health Workforce, there will be a shortage of psychiatrists by 2030, something that increases the need for psychiatric pharmacists. Also, the pandemic has led to a growing number of people reporting mental health disorders and depression and needing help with medication.

And students are responding to that need. The College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists (CPNP) in 2021 announced that the number of pharmacy students interested in psychiatric pharmacy had increased by 277% over the past four years. The number of postgraduate year two residencies in the field has increased by 158%.

Psychiatric pharmacists, according to CPNP, prescribe or recommend appropriate medication, evaluate responses and modify treatments, manage medication adverse reactions, resolve drug interactions, support medication adherence and provide medication education. They often work in government-supported



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hospitals or clinics; public, private and academic hospitals; outpatient mental health clinics; outpatient primary care clinics; and prisons or correctional facilities.

So, if you want to become a psychiatric pharmacist, what do you need to do? Residency program directors who hire psychiatric pharmacists say that the top five things they look for are:

- A postgraduate year two psychiatric residency (67%)
- A board-certified psychiatric pharmacist credential (60%)

- Clinical work experience (30%)
- A postgraduate year one residency (28%)
- Teaching experience (18%)

## BOARD CERTIFICATION

Many who want to become psychiatric pharmacists seek board certification through the Board of Pharmacy Specialties. They offer a specialty certification called the Board Certified Psychiatric Pharmacist (BCPP).

According to the BPS, there are currently more than 1,470 BPS Board-Certified Psychiatric

Pharmacists and the number has increased 23% over the past four years.

To be eligible for certification, applicants must have graduated from an accredited pharmacy program, have a current license to practice pharmacy, demonstrate practical experience (either through residencies or four years of work experience where at least 50% of their time was spent on psychiatric duties) and pass an exam.

BCPPs must get recertified every seven years by passing an

exam or earning 100 hours of continuing education credits.

The BPS claims that the certification enables pharmacists to:

- Provide more comprehensive and complex patient care.
- Be prepared to step into pharmacy's evolving position on the multidisciplinary treatment team.
- Improve their standing in a competitive employment market.
- Be recognized for their expertise by other medical professionals.



# Nurse Practitioners

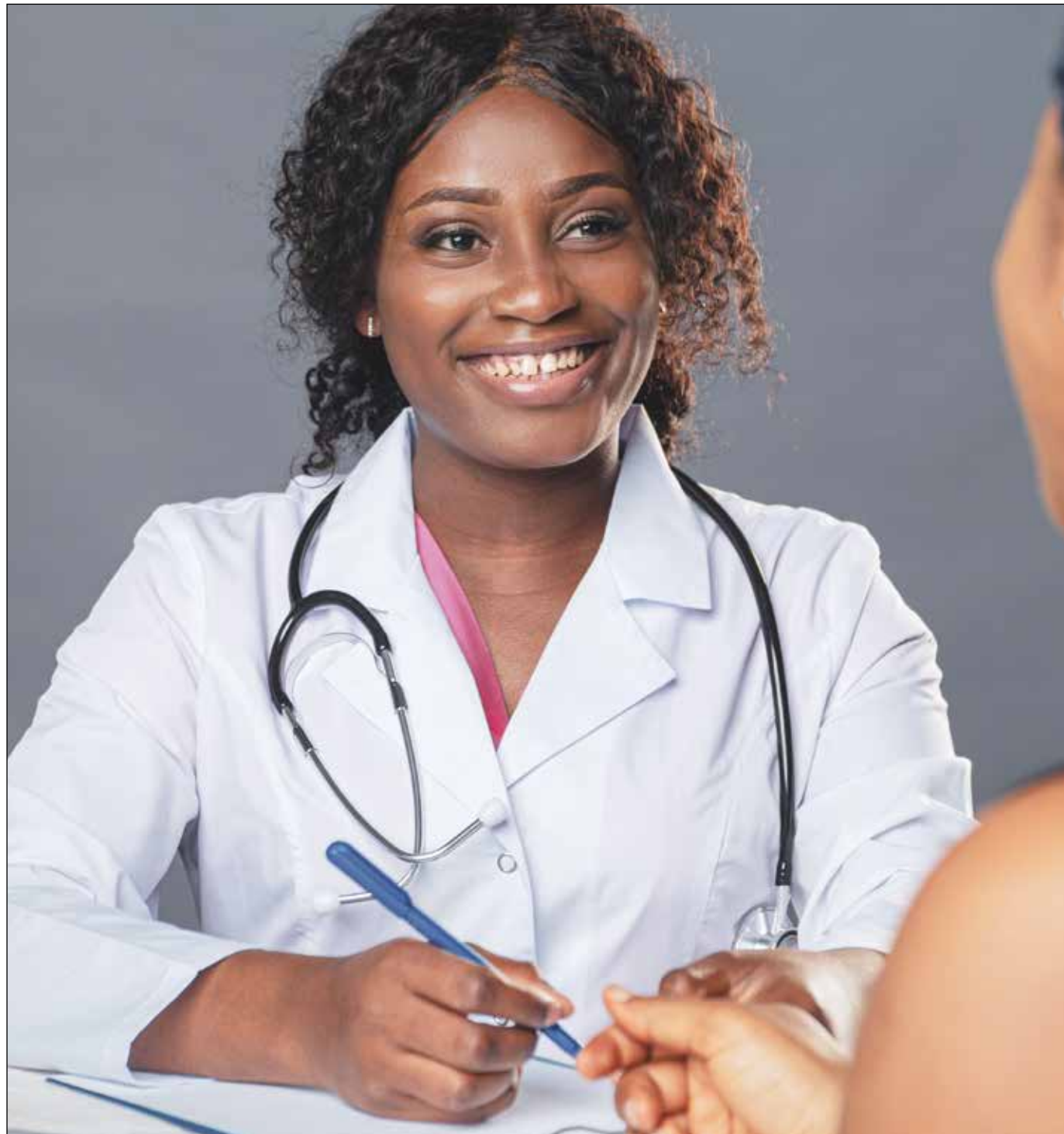
With an impending shortage of psychiatrists and an ever-increasing demand for mental health services, many people with mental health disorders or illnesses are relying on mental health nurse practitioners for their mental health care.

These positions can take the form of Psychiatric-Mental Health (PHM) registered nurses or advanced practice registered nurses (APRN), and according to the American Psychiatric Nurses Association, they represent the second largest group of behavioral health professionals in the United States.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness reported that only 46% of people with mental illness get the care they need, often because it is not available. Mental health nurse practitioners can fill in the gaps.

Nurse practitioners are registered nurses with graduate degrees who can serve as primary care clinicians or community health leaders. Many nurse practitioners specialize in areas such as family medicine, cancer care, pediatrics, elder care or mental health.

Mental health nurse practitioners work in hospitals, pri-



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ivate practice, community centers, assisted living homes, mental health institutions, drug and alcohol treatment centers and schools. They might work with individuals, families, groups or communities. They assess, diagnose and treat mental health and

substance use disorders. They promote mental health awareness and provide education.

## BECOMING A MENTAL HEALTH NURSE PRACTITIONER

The first step in becoming a psychiatric nurse practitioner

is to become a nurse. Start out by earning a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from an accredited nursing school and getting licensed as a registered nurse.

The next step is to earn a master's or doctorate from an accredited psychiatric nurse

practitioner program. Certification requires 500 clinical hours in a faculty-supervised program.

While the laws for nurse practitioners vary from state to state, most professionals in this field will take the psychiatric mental-health nurse practitioner exam from the American Nursing Credentialing Center and apply for a license from the state where they are going to practice. The ANCC board requires recertification/renewal every five years.

## JOB OUTLOOK

While the Bureau of Labor Statistics doesn't break out the specialties of nurse practitioners, they report that the field in general will increase by 45% over the next decade.

The American Psychiatric Nurses Association explains that the need for mental health nurse practitioners is driven by the fact that there are more than 56 million Americans who experience mental illness or struggle with a substance abuse disorder. Only 44% of adults are receiving the care they need and only 20% of children.

Mental health nurse practitioners treat teens and adults experiencing mental health crises, children exposed to traumatic events, older adults struggling with dementia or Alzheimer's, soldiers returning from combat, anyone with substance abuse disorders and people struggling with anxiety, depression or suicidal ideation.



# Case Managers

Many people who try to access community mental health services struggle to navigate the paperwork, resources and programs that exist to help them recover from mental illness or substance abuse.

It's why many services employ case managers who guide their clients through the maze of resources.

Of the 51.5 million Americans that the National Alliance on Mental Illness reports experience mental illness, 13.1 million of them have it so bad that daily life is a challenge. They tend to be the most vulnerable members of society: people with psychiatric illnesses, substance abuse problems or other social challenges that make them unable to advocate for themselves.

## THE ROLE

This is where mental health case managers can step in. They connect clients to resources that help improve the quality of their lives. Often, they monitor clients to make sure they aren't slipping through the cracks or losing out on the care they need.

According to MHAonline, psychiatric case managers use "cutting-edge psychological research and inquiry to best



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aid their patients in reintegrating into society comfortably and with an increasing emphasis on healthy self-reliance. Mental health case managers prioritize the biopsychosocial needs of the patient at all times, typically with a focus on minimizing the monetary cost to the patient.”

Some of the specialty services they might offer include prisoner re-entry services, older adult services, young adult programs, homeless services, substance abuse services and specialized residen-

tial services. They work in such settings as home care situations, hospitals, mental health clinics, prisons and detention centers, substance abuse clinics, churches and homeless centers. Some even work out of their own homes.

## BECOMING A MENTAL HEALTH CASE MANAGER

Most mental health case managers possess a bachelor's degree, but many employers want to see that potential case workers have a master's degree in such fields as psy-

chology, human resources, sociology or social work.

There is board certification available from the Commission for Case Manager Certification. The certification requires education and experience to be eligible to sit for the exam. Once earning the designation, the professionals must recertify every five years.

MHAOnline cites important skills a case manager needs as being observant, intelligent and flexible. Case managers need a deep comprehension and understanding of mental

health and psychiatric assessment. It helps if they are deeply rooted in their community and understand the personality of the community and the resources available in it.

Because they respond to individual needs, it helps if they are well connected with other professionals who they can send clients to, especially when clients are in crisis or experiencing an emergency.

Case managers also need to have a sense of compassion and be able to maintain their client's confidentiality.