

Careers in Mental Health and Counselling

There are so many different professions working with mental health and counselling. How do you choose the path that is right for you? Many students know that they want a career where they are helping people, but they don't know the many options available to them or they are unsure of the differences.

In fact, many of the primary counselling occupations overlap in their work roles, skill sets and places of work. It is not uncommon to find psychologists, social workers and psychotherapists working in the same department and dealing with similar subsets of presenting issues.

KEY DIFFERENCES

Psychiatrists train as medical doctors (MDs) first, and then specialize in psychiatry. They predominantly diagnose and prescribe medication and conduct follow-ups for treatment stabilization, provide consultation/treatment planning recommendations to front line staff (ex. social workers, psychologists, nurses). Some opt to engage in psychotherapy or research.

Psychologists (PHD) and psychological associates (master's) are "trained in the assessment, treatment, and prevention of behavioural and mental conditions. They diagnose neuropsychological disorders and dysfunctions as well as psychotic, neurotic and personality disorders and dysfunctions. In addition, Psychologists and Psychological Associates use a variety of approaches directed toward the maintenance and enhancement of physical, intellectual, emotional, social and interpersonal functioning." (College of Psychologists of Ontario, www.cpo.on.ca) Psychologists and psychological associates must attend an accredited program that provides supervised practice and prepares you for the Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP) exams.

Psychotherapists work with individuals, couples and families in individual and group settings. Psychotherapists work together with their clients to bring about positive change in the client's thinking, feeling, behavior and social functioning. They do not diagnose, and they are limited to the kinds of psychological assessments they can perform. Training for a master's level psychotherapist is generally around two years. A research thesis is typically optional or not required.

Social workers primarily provide counselling and psychotherapy, case management services and various forms of service delivery. They do not diagnose, and they are limited to the kinds of psychological assessments they can perform. Social workers will refer their clients/patients to a psychologist or psychiatrist for evaluation. Training for social workers is around one–two years. A research thesis is typically optional or not required for clinical social work programs.

Occupational therapists may choose to get specialized training in counselling or psychotherapy. They typically focus on improving functioning and reducing impairment in practical ways through life skills, community participation, building motivation and support.



TYPES OF DEGREES

Diploma: Four semesters of study in a program at an Ontario College.

Graduate Certificate Program: Requires a university degree or college certificate/diploma for admission, building on knowledge and experience gained in previous postsecondary study in a specialized area (ontariocolleges.ca).

MEd: A professional master's program with a focus on preparing students for working as a practitioner; does not generally have a required independent research/thesis component (sometimes optional), and tends to be focused on coursework and practicum/internship experience.

MA: A master's program that includes an independent thesis/research component. Generally, the completion of a master's thesis is required for entrance into a doctoral program (ex. PhD).

BSW, RSW, MSW: A Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) is a four-year undergraduate degree that gives you the entry-level requirements for registering with the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW). A Registered Social Worker (RSW) has met the requirements is registered with the OCSWSSW. A Masters of Social Work (MSW) usually refers to an additional year of post-graduate education after an undergraduate BSW. You can also complete a two-year MSW at some schools without a BSW with an honour degree (typically Social Science, but not required).

PsyD (Doctorate of Psychology): Following a scientist-practitioner model, this degree tends to have a greater emphasis on training students to become clinicians/practitioners. It is less common than other doctoral degree options.

PhD: (Doctorate of Philosophy): Following a scientist-practitioner model, this degree tends to have a greater emphasis on training students to become researchers.

EdD (Doctorate of Education): This degree is a research-based degree that often has a focus on how professionals working in the field can apply their research to directly address challenges in a practical way.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS AND REGULATORY COLLEGES

Many of these careers are regulated health professions with helpful resources:

ASSOCIATIONS: Groups intended to support the professionals in the field. These are specific to your career area of interest and often list accredited programs and job boards. Pro tip: Often, you can use the directory to connect with professionals for an informational interview.

REGULATORY COLLEGES: Bodies intended to protect public interest; the college gives information on registration requirements to practice and scope of practice.



PROFESSION	ASSOCIATION	REGULATORY COLLEGE
Occupational Therapist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ontario Society of Occupational Therapists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario
Psychiatrist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ontario Psychiatric Association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario
Psychologist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ontario Psychological Association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College of Psychologists of Ontario
Psychotherapist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario
Registered Nurse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College of Nurses of Ontario
Social Worker and Social Service Workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ontario Association of Social Workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers

TYPES OF PROFESSIONALS

This is not an exhaustive list — enjoy exploring further! Please note that this is a general overview of educational requirements. Some occupations have various educational entry points.

DIPLOMA/ GRADUATE CERTIFICATE*	BACHELOR'S LEVEL	MASTER'S LEVEL	DOCTORAL LEVEL
Autism and Behavioural Science* Brain Disorders Management* Concurrent Disorders* Learning Disabilities Specialist* Mental Health and Disability Management* Recreational Therapist Social Service Worker Youth Worker	Addictions Counsellor Behaviour Analyst Corrections Officer Counsellor Employment Counsellor Life Coach Physician Assistant Psychiatric Nurse (RN) Probation and Parole Officer Social Worker Spiritual Care Provider	Art Therapist Chaplain/Religious Child Life Therapist Counsellor Clinical Nursing/Specialist Couples and Family Therapist Genetic Counsellor Dance Therapist Music Therapist Occupational Therapist Play Therapist Psychological Associate Psychometrist Psychotherapist School & Guidance Counsellor Sex Therapist Social Policy Analyst Social Worker	Family Physician Naturopath School Psychologist Psychiatrist Psychologist Industrial Psychologist



RESEARCHING PROGRAM AND CAREER OPTIONS

If you find some occupational titles that spark your interest, research them through career information databases like [Career Cruising](#), through the search feature on [LinkedIn](#), and by [talking to people](#) currently in the occupation or industry. [Working in Mental Health](#) is a website that profiles occupations in mental health.

Consider [volunteer opportunities](#) with organizations that allow you to volunteer with the population/issue or work setting (you likely will not practice formal counselling until in placement in some professional program).

Once you have made a program decision, refer to our [Considering Further Education](#) tip sheet for more guidance on your application.

The [Student Success Centre](#) can help you explore you options through career counselling, Career Planning Essentials course, career assessments and career exploration supports. We are here to help.

