

What is the Difference Between Psychologists, Psychiatrists, and Social Workers?



Professionals who provide psychotherapy include psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, licensed professional clinical counselors, licensed marriage and family therapists, pastoral counselors, and psychiatric nurse practitioners. Of that group, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers are the most common. All these professionals are trained to offer psychotherapy, but there are differences in their education and training.

Psychologists attend graduate school in psychology. The American Psychological Association recognizes the doctoral degree as the minimum educational requirement for psychologists; these degrees include the Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy), Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology), or Ed.D. (Doctor of Education). Some states allow people with Master's degrees in psychology to use the term "psychologist." Graduate training focuses on all aspects of human behavior, with an emphasis on research and scientific methods. Training for the Ph.D., Psy.D., and Ed.D. typically includes 4-6 years of academic preparation, followed by 1-2 years of full-time supervised work with patients and licensing examinations. Psychologists in some states can prescribe psychiatric medications with additional training, although this is not the case in most states.

Psychiatrists attend medical school and earn an M.D. (Doctor of Medicine) or D.O. (Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine) degree. They can go on for additional, specialized training in psychiatry during a residency (an additional 3-4 years). Training for psychiatrists focuses primarily on biological aspects of mental illness. Because of their medical training, psychiatrists can prescribe medications, and their work with clients may include talk therapy combined with medications.

Social Workers attend graduate school in social work, earning an MSW (Master of Social Work) or LCSW (Licensed Clinical Social Worker) degree. Training typically includes 2 years of coursework and practical experience working at agencies in the community. Social workers are trained to perform psychotherapy, with a particular emphasis on connecting people with the community and support services available there.

Summary of Education and Training

<i>Profession</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Training</i>	<i>Can prescribe medications</i>
Psychologist	M.A., Ph.D., Psy.D., Ed.D.	Graduate courses in human behavior, development, personality, research, statistics, psychotherapy, assessment, ethics. 2 years for Master's degree, 4-6 years for doctoral degree, followed by 1-2 years of full-time internship.	In certain states with additional training
Psychiatrist	M.D., D.O.	Medical school with broad focus on biological functioning (4 years) followed by specialized residency about mental illness and its treatment, with a focus on medications (3-4 years).	Yes
Social Worker	MSW, LCSW	Graduate courses on human behavior, psychotherapy, community resources. 2 years of graduate training, followed by 2-3 years of supervised clinical work.	No

Therapists within each profession typically specialize in working with certain types of people. Some have special skills working with different age groups (e.g., children, adolescents, older adults). Others address certain issues (e.g., drug or alcohol abuse, eating disorders, depression). All these professionals must have a license to practice, granted by the state. All of these professionals, if they choose, have the ability to accept reimbursement from insurance companies.

Psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers can all offer psychotherapy. Credentials (e.g., M.D., Ph.D., or MSW) tell you the therapist has completed a basic course of study and has been granted a degree by an academic institution. A license tells you the therapist has passed an examination administered by the state. But that tells you little about how *good* the therapist is. It's important to interview potential therapists and learn about their credentials, experience, and approach to psychotherapy and then judge for yourself how comfortable you feel with the person.