



Pathways to a Career in Behavioral Health

If you have a passion for helping others, possess good listening and communication skills, and enjoy interacting with people, then this could be the field for you. With a career in behavioral health, you can help change lives for the better.

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Thinking About a Career in Behavioral Health?

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Behavioral health careers involve providing services for children, adolescents and adults who may be experiencing behavioral and emotional problems, mental illness, life stresses and/or substance abuse. A wide range of career options are available, so it can be difficult to choose a path or know where to begin. Here's some basic information to help you get started.

Licensed Behavioral Health Professions



Psychiatrist **PRESCRIBER**

Psychiatrists are licensed physicians who specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses in children, adolescents and adults. They may work with patients on everyday problems, such as stress, or more complex issues, such as schizophrenia. Psychiatrists prescribe medications, provide talk therapy and care for patients with complex medical problems.

- **Education Requirements:** Typically a bachelor's degree with pre-medicine coursework, followed by medical school and residency with an optional fellowship for specialized skills. Expect 12 years of coursework post-high school.
- **Work Environment:** Academic health centers, private practice, hospitals, primary care clinics, community agencies, courts and prisons, long-term care/assisted living/hospice, industry, government, military settings, schools and universities, substance use programs, emergency rooms.
- **Projected Growth:** 14 percent (much higher than average).

Average Salary: \$180,260



Physician Assistant **PRESCRIBER**

Physician assistants (PAs) practice medicine under physician supervision. PAs conduct medical histories and physicals, perform psychiatric evaluations and assessments, order and interpret diagnostic studies, and establish and manage treatment plans, which includes prescribing medications and ordering referrals as needed. PA students receive a broad medical education, including classroom study and clinical rotations in psychiatry, geriatrics, family practice and more.

- **Education Requirements:** Typically a bachelor's degree, then PA graduate school, including a mix of classroom work and supervised patient care over two to three years. Expect about six years of coursework post-high school.
- **Work Environment:** Behavioral health facilities, psychiatric hospital units, private practice, psychiatric emergency departments, emergency rooms, private health clinics, prisons and jails.
- **Projected Growth:** 30 percent (much higher than average).

Average Salary: \$95,340

To find more information and resources about behavioral health careers, visit BHECN's webpage at unmc.edu/bhecncareerpathways.



Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner (APRN-NP) **PRESCRIBER**

Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners are advanced practice registered nurses (APRN-NP) who can diagnose and treat mental illnesses and promote the mental health of individuals and families. Psychiatric nurse practitioners offer psychiatric/mental health assessments, order laboratory tests, conduct psychotherapy, and manage medications. They specialize in treating those who have more serious mental health problems than those managed by a local primary care physician.

There are also opportunities for nurses (RNs, LPNs) and nursing assistants (CNAs, psychiatric technicians) to work in inpatient and outpatient psychiatric settings.

- **Education Requirements:** Typically Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) and Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) or Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degrees. Expect six to nine years of coursework post-high school.
- **Work Environment:** Offices of physicians or other health practitioners, private practice, hospitals, outpatient clinics, community agencies, colleges and universities.
- **Projected Growth:** 31 percent (much higher than average).

Average Salary: \$91,100



Licensed Psychologist

A psychologist is an independently licensed behavioral health professional who performs psychological assessments, provides therapy, and conducts research on mental health disorders. Licensed psychologists require a doctoral degree (Ph.D.) in an applied area of psychology, such as the following:

- **Clinical psychologists** assess, diagnose and treat mental, emotional and behavioral disorders, and help people manage problems ranging from short-term personal issues to severe mental illness, such as bipolar disorder, major depression and schizophrenia.
- **Counseling psychologists** assess and treat patients with difficulties related to social and emotional problems, including major life events at home or in the workplace (issues at work, marriage problems, loss of a loved one).
- **School psychologists** work in schools to diagnose and treat child behavioral and learning problems; design and implement treatment plans and evaluate performances; and provide therapy to students and families.
- **Education Requirements:** Bachelor's degree followed by graduate school (some graduate programs require a bachelor's in psychology). Clinical and counseling psychologists typically pursue a Ph.D. or Psy.D. School psychologists can also pursue an Ed.S. (educational specialist degree). Expect seven to 10 years of coursework post-high school.
- **Work Environment:** Human service agencies, hospitals, universities, government agencies, private mental health practices, primary care practices, rehabilitation facilities, correctional institutions, elementary and secondary schools (particularly for Ed.S. school psychologists).
- **Projected Growth:** 19 percent (higher than average).

Average Salary: \$98,000



Professional Mental Health Counselor

A professional mental health counselor creates purposeful relationships that empower diverse individuals, couples, families, children, adolescents and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals. They apply mental health, psychological, human development, or family systems principles and interventions to help clients adjust their thoughts, feelings or actions. They also diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders, such as anxiety and depression.

- **Education Requirements:** Typically a bachelor's degree followed by a master's degree that includes a supervised practicum and internship. Expect six to seven years of coursework post-high school.
- **Work Environment:** Individual and family services; outpatient and inpatient intellectual and developmental disability, mental health, and substance abuse centers; hospitals; state and local government.
- **Projected Growth:** 20 percent (much higher than average).

Average Salary: \$46,510



Marriage and Family Therapist

Marriage and family therapists (MFTs) work with individuals, couples and families. Unlike other types of mental health professionals, they bring a family-centered perspective to treatment, even when treating individuals. They evaluate family roles and development to understand how clients' families affect their mental health. They treat the clients' relationships, not just the clients themselves, and address issues such as low self-esteem, stress, addiction and substance abuse.

- **Education Requirements:** Typically a bachelor's degree followed by a master's degree in marriage and family therapy. Expect six years of coursework post-high school.
- **Work Environment:** Individual and family services, state and local government, outpatient care centers, offices of other health practitioners, nursing and residential care facilities.
- **Projected Growth:** 15 percent (much higher than average).

Average Salary: \$43,390



Clinical Social Worker

Clinical social work is a specialty practice area of social work that focuses on the assessment, diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illness and emotional and other behavioral disturbances. Individual, group and family therapy are common treatment modalities. Clinical social workers are required to have a master's degree in social work and state licensure.

- **Education Requirements:** Typically a bachelor's degree, followed by a master's in a social work program that includes a practicum to gain experience working with people. Expect about six years of coursework post-high school.
- **Work Environment:** Hospitals; senior centers and long-term care facilities; mental health clinics; private practices; state and local governments; schools, colleges and universities; substance abuse clinics; military bases and hospitals; correctional facilities; child welfare agencies; employee assistance programs.
- **Projected Growth:** 12 percent (higher than average).

Average Salary: \$41,426



Substance Use Disorder Counselor

Substance use disorder counselors evaluate individuals for substance use disorder, assess for openness to treatment, develop treatment goals, recommend treatment options and help clients develop skills to recover from substance use disorder. They also assist and teach families about substance use disorders and refer clients to community resources.

- **Education Requirements:** There are many routes to becoming a substance use disorder counselor. Individuals can enter this field with either a high school diploma or a college degree*, as long as they have the initial substance abuse disorder education and the required number of supervised practice hours. Expect one to six years of coursework post-high school.

** A related associate's degree can be in addictions or chemical dependency; related bachelor's and/or master's degree can be in counseling, addictions, social work, sociology or psychology.*

- **Work Environment:** Outpatient care centers; residential intellectual and developmental disability mental health, and substance abuse facilities; individual and family services; hospitals; state and local government, excluding education and hospitals.
- **Projected Growth:** 22 percent (much higher than average).

Average Salary: \$40,900