

SELECTING A MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONER

There is much role ambiguity among behavioral health practitioners meaning that people with quite different training may be similarly employed. The purpose of this is to create an array of perspectives in team settings or to match those needing services with whom is best able to help them. The following definitions do not capture all of the activities of each profession, but highlight their strengths.

Counselor - Counselors are trained in therapeutic technique and theory. They provide “talk therapy” as opposed to medication to help people with their concerns. Some counselors have extra focus on a specific topic such as marriage and family. In the behavioral health setting counselors can be found providing therapy or case management services.

Chemical Dependency Counselor - Works with people to overcome an addiction to drugs or alcohol in individual or group settings. They may also assist families of people with addictions to better understand addiction and how to help their loved one. There are four increments of chemical dependency counseling certification: Trainees, level 1, level 2, and level 3 practitioners.

LPC - This is an abbreviation for Licensed Professional Counselor; it means that the counselor meets at least minimum state standards to provide counseling services to the public.

LPC-MH - This is an abbreviation for Licensed Professional Counselor - Mental Health; it is a higher level of licensure requiring more training and supervision. The LPC-MH level may be required for insurance or Medicaid reimbursement.

LMFT - This abbreviation is for Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists who are trained to diagnose and treat clinical problems including depression, marital problems, anxiety, individual psychological problems and child-parent problems.

Psychiatrist - A psychiatrist is a physician with additional specialized training in psychiatry. In the behavioral health setting, psychiatrists prescribe medications and engage patients in therapy. Under the supervision of a physician, physician’s assistants and certified nurse practitioners can also prescribe medications.

Psychologist - Licensed psychologists complete a standardized training program at the doctoral level. Training involves understanding the development of personality, learning and interpersonal relationships. Using tests to evaluate individuals is usually a major emphasis, but they also conduct individual, family and group therapy.

School Psychologist - Works in the school setting to help individual students resolve learning and behavioral challenges that are affecting academic performance and to help teachers improve the learning process. School psychologists are trained in both psychology and education.

Social Worker - Social workers are trained to complete a variety of tasks and are found in many areas outside of behavioral health services. In the behavioral health setting, social workers might provide talk therapy, case management or connect people to resources.

SWA - This is an abbreviation for the licensure title of Social Work Associate. Social workers with this credential have met minimum state standards to practice social work.

SW - This is an abbreviation for the licensure title of Licensed Social Worker. Some social workers indicate this licensure as LSW to match the paper license they received when they became licensed.

Social workers with this licensure most likely completed a bachelor's of social work (BSW) degree.

CSW - This is an abbreviation for the licensure title of Clinical Social Worker. Social workers with this licensure have completed a master's of social work (MSW) or a doctorate of social work (DSW) degree.

CSW-PIP - This is an abbreviation for Clinical Social Worker - Practitioner in Private Practice. It is a higher level of licensure requiring more training and supervision to qualify for. The CSW-PIP license may be required to bill certain insurance providers.

Learn more about South Dakota licensing requirements by visiting the Licensing Boards page at dss.sd.gov for alcohol and drug professionals, counselors, psychologists and social workers or doh.sd.gov for physicians and nurses.

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Choosing among the many options available in mental health care can be a confusing task. As with any type of service there are basic questions that can assist you in becoming an informed consumer. Ask yourself these questions:

- * What are the critical issues for which you would like to obtain help and what are the desired results you hope to see?
- * Do you have a preference regarding type of setting (i.e. inpatient, outpatient, group therapy, etc.) or type of therapeutic approach?
- * Is there a particular time of the day or week that would be best for you in arranging an appointment?
- * Is there coverage offered by your insurance, health care plan, or employer that can offset some or all of the cost of treatment?

With this information in mind, select two or three mental health practitioners and call for a short phone interview. Briefly describe your issues or goals and ask if the provider is skilled in these areas. Ask a few questions about the provider's background and practices.

- * What therapeutic approaches and techniques does she or he most frequently use?
- * How will therapeutic goals be established? How will you know when therapy is complete?

After talking with a potential practitioner, ask yourself:

- * Did you feel a sense of confidence in this person?
- * Did the practitioner's approach seem to make sense to you?
- * And most of all, did you feel comfortable talking with this practitioner?