

## So, You Want to Be a Counselor/Therapist?

By Christopher Adams, PhD

### What is Counseling vs. Psychotherapy?

Historically, “counseling” focused on helping people cope with normal issues such as life transitions, marital problems, etc. “Psychotherapy,” on the other hand, was targeted at personality reconstruction and the treatment of severely mentally-ill people. Nowadays, these terms tend to be used interchangeably.

If you’re interested in pursuing a career in which you would provide counseling/psychotherapy, there are a few options. I would NOT pursue a master’s in either clinical or counseling psychology as these typically do not lead to licensure (and therefore, it will be difficult to find employment). I would only pursue a degree in one of the following fields. All require additional education beyond the Bachelor’s degree.

### Doctoral-level Degrees:

Doctoral programs tend to take at least 5 years to complete, and come in two forms: PhD and PsyD. PhD programs tend to emphasize training in research and the practice of counseling/psychotherapy (although some programs are very heavily research focused). PsyD programs tend to emphasize training in the practice of counseling/therapy. Regardless of the type of program, students must take courses in addition to completing supervised practica in clinical settings. In addition, students must complete a year-long, full-time internship in a clinical setting (under the supervision of a licensed psychologist). In addition, students in PhD and PsyD programs must complete a doctoral dissertation involving original research or scholarship. Doctoral programs tend to be in one of the following areas:

**Clinical Psychology:** “Clinical psychologists assess and treat mental, emotional and behavioral disorders. These range from short-term crises, such as difficulties resulting from adolescent conflicts, to more severe, chronic conditions, such as schizophrenia” (APA, 2011, p. 4). Clinical Psychologists typically work in hospitals, agencies, and private practice with severely mentally disturbed individuals providing assessment and therapy. They also work in universities and other settings conducting research, teaching, consulting, and providing supervision.

**Counseling Psychology:** “Counseling psychologists help people recognize their strengths and resources to cope with everyday problems and serious adversity” (APA, 2011, p. 5). Counseling Psychologists tend to adopt a developmental perspective and typically work in college counseling centers, schools, and private practice, dealing with problems with every-day life (e.g., career difficulties, marital/relationship problems). Like Clinical Psychologists, Counseling Psychologists also work in universities and other settings conducting research, teaching, consulting, and providing supervision.

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The differences between Clinical and Counseling psychology are more historical and philosophical in nature. Nowadays, there aren't too many differences between the two areas as Clinical and Counseling Psychologists are trained comparably and end up working in similar settings and with similar populations/issues.

Doctoral programs in Clinical and Counseling psychology are accredited by the American Psychological Association. A list of accredited programs may be found here: <http://apps.apa.org/accredsearch/>

### **Master's-Level Degrees:**

Master's programs typically take 3 years to complete (if going full-time). You will take courses in topics such as:

- Counseling Theories & Techniques
- Assessment
- Case Management
- Diversity
- Professional Identity
- Legal & Ethical Issues
- Research Methods
- Psychopathology
- Specialty Courses (e.g., Family Counseling, Substance Abuse Treatment)

In addition to coursework, you will complete practica providing counseling/therapy (under the supervision of a licensed professional). Your final step in these programs will be to complete a full-time internship (typically, over the course of a full academic year).

If you're interested in master's degrees, you should look for a master's degree in Mental Health Counseling, Clinical Social Work, or Marriage and Family Therapy – these all lead to licensure.

**(Clinical) Mental Health Counseling** tends to focus a lot on doing counseling/psychotherapy. You can learn more here: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/substance-abuse-behavioral-disorder-and-mental-health-counselors.htm>

Master's programs in MHC are accredited by an organization known as CACREP: <http://www.cacrep.org/> and <http://www.cacrep.org/for-students/>

**Clinical Social Work** allows you to do counseling/therapy, but also emphasizes prevention/outreach and case management. You can learn more here: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm>

Master's programs are accredited by the Council on Social Work Education: <https://cswe.org/>

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**Marriage & Family Therapy** tends to focus a lot more on learning how to do counseling with couples and families (although you will also learn how to individual counseling). You can learn more about MFT here: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/marriage-and-family-therapists.htm>

These programs are accredited by COAMFTE: <http://coamfte.org/iMIS15/coamfte/>

### **Accreditation:**

Regardless of the type of program, it is strongly suggested that you only consider accredited programs. A growing number of states require graduation from an accredited program for licensure and some employers will only hire graduates of accredited programs. While many unaccredited programs are quite good, you run the risk of having a more difficult time obtaining licensure and finding employment.

### **General Admissions Requirements:**

Generally, admissions committees are looking for very strong, well-rounded applicants. Most importantly, applicants to grad programs should have excellent undergraduate records (as indicated by your GPA and transcripts). You may also have to take a standardized test (such as the GRE) and score quite high on it (typically, well above the average or 50<sup>th</sup> percentile). In addition, graduate programs look for applicants with exceptional letters of recommendation and extracurricular activities (such as research experience, an internship, volunteering, and relevant work experience).

**Doctoral Programs:** Admissions requirements vary depending on the type of doctoral program (that is, PhD vs. PsyD, research-oriented vs. clinically-focused program). Regardless, doctoral programs tend to look for an overall GPA of at least 3.5 and a psychology GPA of 3.6 or higher. Typically, doctoral programs require standardized test scores and look for scores at least in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile. In addition, doctoral programs (even PsyD ones) tend to want applicants to have research experience and other extracurricular activities on their resumes.

Acceptance rates in doctoral programs range from 40-50% (for some less selective PsyD programs) to 7% (for very competitive PhD) programs.

**Master's Programs:** Master's programs tend to be less difficult to get into, although are still highly competitive. Master's programs typically look for a minimum GPA of 3.0-3.2. While many master's programs have moved away from requiring standardized test scores, several still require these and tend to look for scores at least in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher. While master's programs may not look for research experience, they will look for involvement in various activities such as volunteering.

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## Licensure:

Upon graduation from a grad program, you generally must become licensed to practice independently. In order to become licensed, you typically need to pass licensure exams and complete at 1-2 years of full-time work under the supervision of a licensed professional.

## Getting Into Graduate Programs:

While doctoral and master's programs may look for some different things from their applicants, below are some suggestions for increasing your odds of getting into graduate school:

- Treat school like a job. Take all of your undergraduate courses seriously – you want as high of a GPA as you can get. GPAs below 3.0 likely will not get you into grad school!
- Be intentional. Select undergraduate courses wisely and map out your education. If you're interested in a career as a therapist, consider taking courses that will best prepare you for grad school. For example, be sure to take Psychology courses such as Abnormal Psychology, Personality, and Development. Also, consider taking courses in fields such as Human Services, Sociology, and Biology.
- Get to know your undergraduate professors. The better they know you, the easier time they'll have writing strong letters of recommendation. Plus, they may know people in some of the grad programs you're interested in applying to.
- Get involved in research. Doing so will not only help you get into doctoral programs, it will also look impressive to master's programs. Ask your professors if they are looking for research assistants.
- Seek out extracurricular opportunities. Volunteer or look for relevant work experiences.
- Consider doing an internship. You can pursue an internship in a clinical setting providing some direct services or in a research setting serving as a research assistant. Contact the program's internship coordinator for more information.
- Do your research. Not all grad programs are created the same. If, for example, you are interested in doing research on or treating individuals suffering from PTSD, make sure you locate programs that have faculty with such interests. Also, make sure you understand the admissions requirements of the programs you're interested in.
- Reach out. Consider contacting faculty at the programs you're interested in. They often can help you better understand the programs and their admissions requirements. They may also be willing to talk to you about their research interests.
- Don't wait until the last minute. It is never too soon to begin investigating grad programs or talk to one of your professors about your interests (see next section).
- Expand your search. Unless you absolutely have to, don't restrict your search for programs to a small geographic area (such as Boston). You have much greater chance of getting accepted into programs in you look in a variety of areas, especially as programs often like to bring in students from outside their location. For example, instead of just looking in the Boston area, look in all of New England (or other areas you might be open to living in).

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### **Application Process:**

- Starting Freshman year
  1. Research the various counseling-related fields.
  2. Talk to professors about your options and what they believe would be a good fit for you.
  3. Once you've narrowed down the field of study (for example, to mental health counseling), research graduate programs and their admissions requirements as soon as you can, but no later than summer before senior year.
- Summer before Senior year
  1. Continue researching potential grad programs
  2. Contact potential programs with any questions you have
  3. Study for the GRE (or other required admissions tests)
  4. Take the GRE or other required tests the summer before senior year
- Fall of Senior year
  1. Take GRE again (if needed), but by no later than November
  2. Work on grad school applications (including personal statements)
  3. Obtain supporting materials for applications (including letters of recommendation, transcripts, work samples, etc)
  4. Have GRE (or other tests) scores sent to the schools you're applying to
- Winter/Spring of Senior Year
  1. Send out/submit applications (Doctoral programs often have deadlines between Dec-Feb; Master's programs often have deadlines between Feb-Mar)
  2. Follow up with programs to see if they've received your materials
  3. Prepare for phone and/or in-person interviews (if invited for one)
  4. Go on interviews (if required) – Dress in business attire!
  5. Hopefully receive acceptance letters!

### **Other Related Fields:**

You may find some of the following fields interesting:

- Psychiatry
- Psychiatric Nursing
- Neurology
- Rehabilitation Counseling
- Substance Abuse/Addictions Counseling
- Social Psychology
- Developmental Psychology
- Industrial/Organizational Psychology
- School Counseling
- School and Educational Psychology
- Applied Behavior Analysis

For more information on these (and other related fields), go to: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/>

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