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Mental Health Providers: What's the Difference?

What's the difference between a psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker and marriage and family therapist? Who prescribes medication?

Psychiatrists are medical physicians who specialize in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental illnesses and psychological disturbances. They have completed a four-year residency in psychiatry following medical school. Psychiatrists are uniquely qualified to assess both the mental and physical aspects of presenting symptoms. They can make a complete, accurate diagnosis and then recommend or provide treatment. As physicians, they are able to prescribe medication and are experts in the use of medication to treat emotional distress. They also specialize in treating the medical and psychological interface between illnesses such as chronic headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, asthma, and pain because these illnesses often have an emotional component.

If you are considering medication -- unless you are experiencing a fairly straightforward clinical depression or anxiety -- it is often best to see a psychiatrist for a good medication evaluation. Psychiatrists have significantly more training in the use of psychiatric medications than do primary care physicians. In addition, many medications, substances and physical illnesses affect our mood. For example, diabetes and hypothyroidism are known to cause depression, and a psychiatrist will be best able to treat you. Treatment recommendations may include a combination of medication and psychotherapy. While some psychiatrists are trained as psychotherapists, others are not. Ask the psychiatrist's office staff if he or she practices psychotherapy.

Licensed Psychologists have a Doctorate in Clinical or Counseling Psychology. As part of their degree requirements, they complete a year-long supervised clinical internship emphasizing the theory and practice of therapy. In addition to being highly trained as therapists, Psychologists are the only discipline trained to administer and interpret psychological tests. They generally work in a wide variety of settings and with a range of individuals -- sometimes with clients who present with more severe disorders, such as psychoses and other mental illnesses as well as with individuals experiencing more typical life stressors. They may work in private practice, community mental health clinics, or hospitals.

Licensed Clinical Social Workers, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, and Licensed Clinical Professional Counselors have a minimum of a Master's Degree and are trained to work with individuals, couples, and families, and sometimes groups. As a requirement for licensure, they also must complete a supervised clinical internship and

are trained primarily in the theory and practice of therapy. They generally work in an outpatient private practice, agency, or mental health clinic.

Pastoral Counselors are ordained ministers or clergy who have additional supervised training in counseling that weaves together the religious or spiritual and the psychological. They may be certified by an organization, such as the American Association of Pastoral Counselors.