

WHAT IS A PSYCHOLOGIST?

By Mary Lynn Crow, Ph.D.

There are many types of helpers in the mental health field with different levels of qualifications and areas of specialization. They include psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical social workers, licensed professional counselors, certified alcohol and drug abuse counselors, marriage and family therapists, vocational counselors, and pastoral counselors among others. Each has its own education requirements, licensure, and sometimes required professional association membership. Each helper is required to stay within his/her own area of education and expertise. Many psychologists and psychiatrists are also Board Certified, which signifies an even higher level of accomplishment, and are also required to maintain good standing in their respective professional associations.

A psychologist is a doctoral-level professional from an accredited graduate program, licensed by the state, who has specific recognized areas of expertise. They are trained to do psychological testing, to make diagnoses, and to offer individual and group therapy. The American Psychological Association says psychologists are experts at helping people find their way through life's difficulties including such common sources of distress as relationship problems, career and family conflicts, physical illness, work stress, substance abuse and addiction, and the anxiety and depression that can accompany these and other challenges. The National Register of Health Service Providers defines a psychologist as one who has earned his/her advanced credential and who is trained and experienced in the delivery of direct, preventive, and therapeutic intervention services to individuals whose growth, adjustment, or functioning is impaired.

As you sort through the various types of helpers with their credentials, remember that educational degrees from educational institutions are not the same as state licensure and protected titles. A doctoral degree in psychology without a state certification or license does not allow one to practice independently as a psychologist. Neither does a degree from a medical school without a psychiatric specialty allow one to be called a psychiatrist. A major difference between a clinical psychologist and a psychiatrist is that psychiatrists, as physicians, prescribe medicine while psychologists provide both psychological testing and psychotherapy.

Although licensed psychologists in some states can now prescribe medicine, in most states it is not yet allowed. In Texas, for example, it is more typical for a psychiatrist to prescribe necessary medications, and for a psychologist to provide the assessment, therapy, or counseling. Often, with the patient's permission, the two professionals will work together to coordinate services. Many physicians, especially general practitioners and pediatricians, refer patients for psychological evaluation before prescribing medication or performing procedures such as bariatric surgery.

Education does not stop when you have received your terminal (or highest) degree. Licensing agencies require that you continue to read and study and to take advanced

courses in order to keep your skills current. Further, just because you are licensed to practice in one state does not necessarily mean you will be allowed to practice in another. Practitioners must re-credential to be licensed in each individual state in which they practice.

Beyond education and licensure, all psychologists are not alike. Like professionals in other fields, they are individuals with different cultural identities, ages, values, lifestyles, personalities, and areas of expertise. They may do individual therapy, play therapy, or group therapy. They may perform clinical hypnosis, psychological testing, or serve as expert witnesses in court. They may specialize in specific populations (like blended families) or in specific age groups (like children and adolescents). Some psychologists work in a group practice, and some work independently. Their education and internships may come from different theoretical orientations which may then determine the style of counseling they prefer such as behavioral, psychoanalytic, rational, or Imago. They may be sports psychologists or health psychologists or industrial psychologists. Some may even specialize in specific problem areas such as parenting issues, eating disorders, sexual abuse, or ADHD.

Finally, psychologists, like other professionals, abide by a strict code of ethics. This code goes far beyond what is required by the laws of the community or the state. Ethical issues focus on the special nature of the relationship between doctor and patient as well as the overall behavior and ethics of the individual. Psychologists who commit a felony or who break their ethical code are subject to license removal.

You may pay your psychologist directly or if you are enrolled in a managed care program, your psychologist will accept fees paid directly by your managed care company. To determine if your health insurance plan will cover the costs, you can call your insurance carrier directly, or call your employer's human resources or benefits representative.

In this part of Texas, first-line resources for locating licensed psychologists include the Texas Psychological Association, The National Register of Health Service Providers in Texas, the Fort Worth Area Psychological Association, and the Mental Health Association in your county. Word of mouth from a trusted friend may be your very best referral. Choosing a psychologist to care for you and your family is similar in importance and challenge to selecting your family physician. Because the individual match is so important, sometimes it takes a visit or two before you are ready to make that decision. But remember, when the road of life takes a tough turn, a psychologist can help!