

Mental health workers: who's who?

There are a range of professionals who can help with mental health issues.

It can sometimes be confusing to work out who does what.

This is a guide to the different mental health workers you might come across.

Psychiatrist

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who are experts in mental health. They are specialists in diagnosing and treating people with mental illness.

Psychiatrists have a medical degree plus extra mental health training. They have done at least 11 years of university study and medical training.

They treat all types of mental illness, from mild to severe.

Psychiatrists can:

- diagnose mental illness
- help with both your physical and mental health
- review your life situation and history and how it affects your mental health
- provide medication and psychological treatments (talking therapies)
- prepare reports for a court
- admit you to hospital when needed
- arrange other medical services such as pathology tests and referrals to other doctors.

Psychiatrists often lead teams of other mental health workers. They work with you to decide how you will be treated and who should be involved.

You might see a psychiatrist at a hospital, in a private office or at a community health service.

You need a referral from your GP (family doctor) to see a psychiatrist. In Australia, Medicare rebates are available for psychiatry appointments.

➤ More about psychiatrists

yourhealthinmind.org/what

➤ Find a psychiatrist

yourhealthinmind.org/find

GP (family doctor)

Your GP is the person to talk to first if you are worried about your mental health.

GPs have a medical degree and most also have several years of supervised experience. Some GPs have extra training in mental health.

They can provide general medical advice, as well as:

- diagnose some mental health problems
- provide support and advice
- refer you to a psychiatrist or psychologist
- prepare a Mental Health Treatment Plan (in Australia)
- prescribe medications for you
- keep track of your physical health and any side effects of medication
- follow up after you've finished seeing a psychiatrist or psychologist.

Some GPs can also offer psychological treatments (talking therapy).

Once you find a GP you are happy with, stick with them. A good ongoing relationship with your GP can lead to fewer specialist appointments or hospital visits, and a better chance of recovery.

Psychologist

Psychologists are experts in the way people think, feel and behave.

Psychologists have at least 6 years of university study and supervised experience. They may also have a Masters or Doctorate level qualification.

There are different types of psychologists. Clinical psychologists have special training in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. They are the type of psychologist you are most likely to see for help with a mental health issue.

All psychologists must be registered with the Psychology Board of Australia or the New Zealand Psychologists Board.

Psychologists can:

- diagnose mental illness
- provide psychological treatments
- test for intellectual and psychological function
- prepare reports for a court.

Psychologists are not medical doctors and don't prescribe medication.

It's possible to see a psychologist without a referral.

But, in Australia, ask your GP for a referral as part of a Mental Health Treatment Plan. Medicare will then cover some or all of the cost of seeing the psychologist.

👉 Psychiatrist and psychologist: what's the difference?

yourhealthinmind.org/difference

Other mental health workers

Mental health nurse

A mental health nurse has a nursing degree plus experience or training in mental health.

They can help with:

- taking your medication
- developing behaviour programs
- supporting you and your carers.

Mental health nurses mostly work in hospitals and community health centres, as well as private clinics.

Case manager

A case manager is a health professional (perhaps an occupational therapist, a nurse or a psychologist) who provides ongoing help to manage mental illness.

They can:

- keep track of your mental health
- develop care plans
- help you stick to a course of medication or therapy
- help you and your family to learn about and deal with your illness
- provide specialist therapies
- link you to community activities and services.

Case managers work in the community so they may visit you at home.

Social worker

Some social workers have extra experience or training in mental health.

They can help with:

- relationship problems
- a crisis in your life
- adjustment issues
- traumatic events.

Social workers work in private offices, hospitals and community health centres.

Paediatrician

Paediatricians are medical doctors who are experts in children's health. Paediatricians have completed at least 12 years of university study and training.

They can help children with mental health issues such as:

- autism
- sleep problems
- ADHD
- other behavioural and developmental problems.

They can also refer a child to a child psychiatrist if needed.

Occupational therapist

Occupational therapists are trained to help with getting you back to daily activities such as work, study, cooking and cleaning, transport and socialising. Some have extra training or experience in mental health.

They can:

- design activities to help with independence
- come up with coping strategies
- help with improving social skills.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health worker

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workers have unique cultural knowledge, insights and skills to support the social and emotional well-being and mental health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

They can:

- work with other professionals to provide a culturally safe environment
- provide cultural and social support
- act as an advocate to access mainstream mental health services.

Māori mental health worker (Kaiāwhina or cultural advisor)

Māori Mental Health Workers have the special knowledge and skills to help Māori and whānau with mental health issues. They are likely to be working in kaupapa Māori mental health services, Māori PHOs (primary health organisations) and in the community.

Therapist

A therapist is someone who provides psychological treatments.

A family therapist, for example, might help you to work through difficulties with members of your

family. A relationship therapist may help with improving your interpersonal skills.

There are many types of therapists, with different levels of training, skills and experience. Ask about what training and accreditation your therapist has before you start treatment.

Counsellor

A counsellor will listen to you and help to clarify problems in your life. Counsellors often work at schools, community health centres, prisons, hospitals and in private practice.

There are many types of counsellors, with different levels of training, skills and experience. Ask about what training and accreditation your counsellor has before you start treatment.

Peer worker

Peer workers have lived experience of mental illness. They provide hope that change is possible and can help you to understand and make sense of your experiences.

Websites, helplines and support groups

- Mental health support services
yourhealthinmind.org/support

Remember

- ✓ There are many people available to help with mental health issues.
- ✓ Your GP (family doctor) is the first place to go.
- ✓ Psychiatrists can diagnose mental illness and plan your treatment as a whole.

This fact sheet is also available online at yourhealthinmind.org

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About us

Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists:

- trains and supports psychiatrists
- advocates for better mental health for our communities
- sets standards in psychiatry.



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This is a general guide only, and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your situation. The RANZCP is not liable for any consequences arising from relying on this information. Subject matter experts, people with lived experience of mental illness and carers all contributed to this fact sheet.