

# What is a psychiatrist?

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

Psychiatrists have a deep understanding of physical and mental health – and how they affect each other.

They help people with mental health conditions such as schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, eating disorders and addiction.

## What does a psychiatrist do?

Psychiatrists assess all of your mental and physical symptoms.

They make a diagnosis and work with you to develop a management plan for your treatment and recovery.

Psychiatrists provide psychological treatment, prescribe medications and do procedures such as electroconvulsive therapy.

As part of their work, a psychiatrist can:

- provide urgent care for a sudden mental illness
- help you to manage a long-term mental health condition
- provide advice about lifestyle changes
- work with you individually, or with you and your partner, family or carers
- provide second opinions and advice to other doctors and health professionals
- refer you to other health professionals
- admit you to hospital if required.

## What can a psychiatrist help with?

A psychiatrist can be of particular help if your mental health condition:

- is complex or difficult to diagnose
- involves suicidal ideas or plans
- is severe or happens suddenly
- needs medication that only a psychiatrist can prescribe
- isn't responding to standard treatment through your GP (family doctor).

## Common reasons why someone might see a psychiatrist:

- problems adjusting after major life changes or stress
- anxiety, worry or fear
- depressed or low mood that doesn't go away
- suicidal thinking
- thoughts of hurting other people
- hurting yourself on purpose
- too much energy, being unable to sleep, wind down or relax
- constant negative thoughts
- obsessional thinking
- feeling on edge or jumpy
- feeling like people are after you or want to harm you
- hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that aren't there)
- delusions (fixed beliefs with no basis in reality)
- rushing, disjointed thoughts
- out of control alcohol or drug use
- problem gambling, gaming or other addictive behaviours
- problems around body image, eating or dieting
- memory problems
- poor concentration and attention, hyperactivity
- violence, agitation or emotional outbursts
- insomnia and other sleep problems
- conditions that start in childhood such as autism, intellectual disability and childhood anxiety.

## What treatments can a psychiatrist provide?

Psychiatrists provide and recommend a range of treatments, including:

- psychological treatment (also called psychotherapy or talking therapy)
- medication
- brain stimulation therapies, such as electroconvulsive therapy.

They will also offer practical advice about diet, sleep and other ways you can help yourself get better.

They will provide you with information about your condition, which can help you to understand your symptoms and treatments.

Your psychiatrist will only suggest treatments that are proven to be safe and effective.

Your psychiatrist will explain:

- why they recommend this treatment
- how it works
- what the side-effects are
- any risks of the treatment
- how much it costs.

It's up to you whether you agree to have the treatment.

“I am fortunate to have met a number of psychiatrists through my life. They have placed me on a path of recovery through practical ideas, medication and talking things over.”

Evan, Melbourne

## What training does a psychiatrist have?

Psychiatrists do at least 11 years of training – usually more. They first do a medical degree at university. Next they spend at least 1 or 2 years doing general medical training in a hospital.

Then, to become a psychiatrist they must do at least 5 years of psychiatry training under the supervision of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP). This is done while working in hospitals, rural health or community health services.

Some psychiatrists have completed part of their training overseas. They usually complete further training to practice locally. All psychiatrists must also be registered with the relevant medical board in Australia or New Zealand in order to see patients.

## Remember

- ✓ Psychiatrists are specialist medical doctors who are experts in mental health.
- ✓ A psychiatrist's training means they understand both physical and mental health conditions.
- ✓ You need a referral from your GP or another medical doctor to see a private psychiatrist.

## Where do psychiatrists work?

Psychiatrists work in public and private hospitals, community mental health services and in private consulting rooms.

Psychiatrists are also involved in research, providing advice in legal matters, and teaching and advocacy work. This means they also work in government departments, research centres and universities.

Many psychiatrists take on a few different roles at the same time. They might spend part of their time at a public hospital and the rest seeing patients at their own private practice.

“There is a huge variety of psychiatrists amongst our ranks – in the public sector with a stethoscope around their necks in a hospital ward or in the emergency department, conducting home assessments from a community clinic, in a group or solo practice, even in the street helping a homeless person.”

Dr Gary Galambos, psychiatrist

## Subspecialty areas in psychiatry

Some psychiatrists focus on a particular area, such as:

- child and adolescent psychiatry
- perinatal psychiatry (relating to the mental health of mothers and babies)
- young adult psychiatry
- old age psychiatry
- addiction psychiatry
- forensic psychiatry (relating to the law)
- psychotherapy (talking therapies)

➤ Use the Find a Psychiatrist directory to search for psychiatrists by subspecialty  
[yourhealthinmind.org/find](https://yourhealthinmind.org/find)

This fact sheet is also available online at [yourhealthinmind.org](http://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.



The Royal  
Australian &  
New Zealand  
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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.