What is Mental Health?

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What is **mental health?**

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how people think, feel, and act. And it constantly changes.

Many people experience strong emotions and periods of sadness, anxiety, worry, or upset. It's normal to go through events or times where these feelings may be overwhelming. Mental healthcare can help you process these feelings and develop strategies for the future.

What's the difference between **mental health and mental illness?**

Mental health is a part of your health and well-being – it's something that everyone has! But not everyone has mental illnesses, which are diagnosed conditions.

With **mental illness**, the symptoms are more severe. These symptoms get in the way of being able to meet basic needs or functions. You may have trouble sleeping, loss of appetite, or lose interest in your classes, friends, or favorite activities.

Meeting with a mental health professional can support you in diagnosing the problem and creating short and long-term treatments where applicable.

Most common types of licensed mental health professionals

> **Clinical or counseling psychologist**

> **Licensed Clinical Social Worker***

> **Licensed mental health counselor**

> **Marriage and Family Therapist**

> **Psychiatrist**

> **Psychoanalyst**

Mental health professionals are a valuable resource to help support mental health. They provide a range of services to patients like therapy, evaluations, treatment, or medicine. There are different types of mental health professionals but all of them can provide direct support to patients.

When looking for mental health professionals, make sure they have relevant **degrees and licenses** that are recognized by state boards. Some labels may be used interchangeably, especially counselors or therapists.

Note: In the mental health field, "therapist" is a generic term used to refer to anyone who performs psychotherapy.

All these mental health professionals provide psychotherapy for a wide variety of concerns. Their differences lie in the amount of training they receive and the specialized services they can provide.

For example, only a **psychiatrist** can evaluate and prescribe a patient for medication. **Marriage and family therapists** specialize in marriage and family concerns while **psychoanalysts** focus on providing psychoanalytic therapy for their patients.

On the other hand, only **clinical or counseling psychologists** typically have specialized training in testing and diagnosis of mental illness, and often in diagnosing learning disabilities. Lastly, **social workers** often have an important case management role, such as facilitating intake, registration, or referrals to other providers and specialists.

*under supervision, a licensed master social worker can also provide therapy

Any mental health provider you see should be a trusted and licensed resource. In New York, you can check the licenses of any of the above providers (except psychiatrists) through the New York State Education Department's Verification Search.

a **Want more insight into different types of mental health care and professionals who practice them? Check out the Go Ask Alice! question on mental health professionals.**

What does it look like to seek mental health support?

When you meet with a mental health professional, this is often called **counseling** or **therapy**. These words may be used interchangeably. Counseling is often shorter-term, while therapy is a longer process. These meetings are confidential – no one else will know what you talk about without your permission.

Mental health care has many forms, including:

One-on-one sessions with a professional

Medications to treat mental health conditions

Small groups sessions led by a facilitator

In-patient care through a visit to a hospital, rehabilitation, or a live-in mental health facility

When you start seeing a mental health professional, you'll set goals for your time together. You control the discussion topics, type of care you receive, and how a session goes. As you meet with them, check-in with yourself. Does it feel like you're making progress on your goals?

Remember – a counseling relationship goes both ways. You can always seek out a new provider who may better meet your needs. Check out the guide "Finding a Mental Health Provider" for more information.

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