What is Mental Health?

Quick Reference Guide

- What is mental health?
- What’s the difference between mental health and mental illness?
- What do mental health professionals do?
- What does it look like to seek mental health support?

Counseling and Psychological Services

Health Promotion Appointment
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.
What do mental health professionals do?

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Services Provided</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Master’s Degree State license</td>
<td>work with patients around a specific concern where they need support, often as a short-term resource</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapist</td>
<td>Master’s Degree State license</td>
<td>provide general support on a variety of mental health areas, often more long-term care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) State license</td>
<td>often focus on mental illness or more severe mental health concerns, testing and diagnosis of learning disabilities or mental illnesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatrist</td>
<td>Medical Doctor (MD) State license</td>
<td>medication prescribing and management, may provide therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>Master of Social Work (MSW), State license</td>
<td>provide case management services, aid in facilitating intake, registration, or referrals to other providers and specialists, most provide therapy</td>
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Want more insight into different types of therapists and mental health care? Check out the Go Ask Alice! question on types of therapists.
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.

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.