

## What is a Psychiatrist?

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specializes in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses, including substance use disorders. Psychiatrists are qualified to assess both the mental and physical aspects of psychological disturbance. A psychiatrist has completed medical school (is an M.D. or D. O.) and an additional four or more years of residency training in psychiatry.

People seek psychiatric help for many reasons. The problems can be sudden, such as a panic attack, frightening hallucinations, thoughts of suicide, or hearing "voices." Or they may be more long-term, such as feelings of sadness and hopelessness or anxious feelings that never seem to lift, causing everyday life to feel distorted or out of control.

## Diagnosing Patients

Because they are physicians, psychiatrists can order or perform a full range of medical laboratory and psychological tests which, combined with interviews/discussions with patients, help provide a picture of a patient's physical and mental state. Their education and years of clinical training and experience equip them to understand the complex relationship between emotional and other medical illnesses, to evaluate medical and psychological data, to make a diagnosis, and to work with a patient to develop a treatment plan.

Specific diagnoses are based on criteria established in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which contains descriptions, symptoms and other criteria for diagnosing mental disorders.

## Treatments

Psychiatrists use a variety of treatments, including psychotherapy, medication, and other treatments.

**Psychotherapy**, sometimes called talk therapy, is a treatment that involves a talking relationship between a therapist and patient. It can be used to treat a broad variety of mental disorders and emotional difficulties. The goal of psychotherapy is to eliminate or control disabling or troubling symptoms so the patient can function better. Depending on the extent of the problem, treatment may

take just a few sessions over a week or two or may take many sessions over a period of years. There are many forms of psychotherapy and it can be done individually, with a family, or in a group. Some mental illnesses require limited but ongoing treatment in order to manage chronic conditions.

**Medications** are used by psychiatrists in much the same way that medications are used to treat high blood pressure or diabetes. After medical and psychological evaluations, psychiatrists can prescribe medications to help treat mental disorders. Psychiatric medications can help correct imbalances in brain chemistry that are thought to be involved in some mental disorders. Psychiatrists often use medications in combination with psychotherapy. Patients on long-term medication treatment will need to meet with their psychiatrist periodically in order to monitor the effects of medications.

**Other treatments** are also sometimes used by psychiatrists. Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), a medical treatment that involves applying electrical currents to the brain, is used most often to treat severe depression that has not responded to other treatments. Deep brain stimulation, vagus nerve stimulation, and repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation are a few of the newer therapies being used to treat some mental disorders. Light therapy is used to treat seasonal depression.

## Psychiatric Training, Certification

To become a psychiatrist, a person must complete college, then medical school, and then a four-year residency in psychiatry. Some psychiatrists also complete additional specialized fellowship training after their four years of general psychiatry training (see below).

Newly graduated physicians must pass written and oral examinations for a state license to practice medicine. After graduation, doctors typically spend much of the first year of residency training in a hospital taking care of patients with a wide range of medical illnesses. The psychiatrist-in-training then spends at least three additional years in a psychiatric residency learning the diagnosis and treatment of mental illnesses, gaining valuable skills in various forms of psychotherapy and in the use of psychiatric medicines and other treatments.

After completing residency training, most psychiatrists take a voluntary written and oral examination given by the

American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology to become a "board certified" psychiatrist. They must be re-certified every 10 years.

## Psychiatric Specialties

Many psychiatrists continue training beyond the four years to become a psychiatrist. They may study

- \* **Child and adolescent psychiatry**
- \* **Geriatric psychiatry**
- \* **Forensic (legal) psychiatry**
- \* **Addiction psychiatry**
- \* **Pain medicine**
- \* **Psychosomatic (mind and body) medicine**
- \* **Sleep medicine**

Some psychiatrists choose additional training in psychoanalysis at special psychoanalytic institutes or additional training in psychiatric research.

## Where do psychiatrists work?

Psychiatrists work in a variety of settings, including private practices, clinics, general and psychiatric hospitals, university medical centers, community agencies, courts and prisons, nursing homes, industry, government, military settings, schools and universities, rehabilitation programs, emergency rooms, hospices, and many other places. About half of the psychiatrists in the U.S. maintain private practices and many psychiatrists work in multiple settings.

## What is the difference between a psychiatrist and psychologist?

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor with special training in psychiatry who is able to conduct psychotherapy and prescribe medications and other medical treatments.

A psychologist usually has an advanced degree, most commonly in clinical psychology, and often has extensive training in research. Psychologists treat mental disorders with psychotherapy and some specialize in psychological testing and evaluation.

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ABOUT

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## Resources

For more information, please contact:

### **American Psychiatric Association**

[www.healthyminds.org](http://www.healthyminds.org)  
[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)  
Phone: 703-907-7300

### **World Psychiatric Association**

[www.wpanet.org](http://www.wpanet.org)  
Phone: +41-22-305-57-30 (Switzerland)

### **American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, Inc.**

[www.abpn.com](http://www.abpn.com)  
Phone: 847-229-6500

### **American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry**

[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)  
Phone: 202-966-7300

### **American Association of Community Psychiatrists**

[www.communitypsychiatry.org](http://www.communitypsychiatry.org)  
Phone: 972-613-0985

### **American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry**

[www.aagppga.org](http://www.aagppga.org)  
Phone: 770-643-0918

## Ordering Information

Brochures may be ordered by visiting [www.appi.org](http://www.appi.org) or calling 800-368-5777. The brochures are sold by topic in packets of 50. Discount pricing is available for bulk quantities of five or more packets. APA members receive a 20% discount.

This is one in a series of brochures designed to reduce stigma associated with mental illnesses by promoting informed factual discussion of the disorders and their psychiatric treatments. This brochure was developed for educational purposes and does not necessarily reflect opinion or policy of the American Psychiatric Association. For more information, please visit [www.healthyminds.org](http://www.healthyminds.org).

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