



Understanding Mental Health Professions Credentialing

(Note: these categories are listed in the order of level of education/training, but this does not imply or guarantee competency, effectiveness, or importance)

Psychiatrists and other Medical Personnel:

Psychiatrists are medical doctors (either MDs or DOs) who have specialized medical training and licensing in the field of Psychiatry. Psychiatrists evaluate and make diagnoses, admit patients to hospitals, prescribe medications, and sometimes provide psychotherapy in addition to medication. There has been a shortage of psychiatrists for quite a while.

For many reasons, physicians of nearly all types may prescribe psychiatric medications today, even when they may not have much training or background in psychiatry. Sometimes they may be willing to start psychiatric medication and then refer to a psychiatrist for ongoing care. They may also refuse to prescribe medication and make a referral to a psychiatrist.

Physician Assistants (PAs) are licensed and may also diagnose and prescribe psychiatric medications. They practice on healthcare teams with physicians.

Licenses for physicians are managed by the Texas Medical Board, and licenses for physician assistants are managed by the Texas Physician Assistant Board. The status of a license can be checked and verified by the public on-line with these two boards through the same website.

Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners (PNPs) or Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs) are RNs with advanced training, including specialty areas such as Psychiatry. They can diagnose and prescribe medication and sometimes work in collaboration with a physician. Licenses are managed by the Texas Board of Nursing and their status can be checked and verified by the public on-line through the board's website.

Medical and nursing students usually do not encounter mental health clients outside of hospitals and other such training facilities. They cannot diagnose or prescribe medication. They always train under physician or nurse supervision and are actively enrolled in a nursing or medical school.

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**Psychologists:**

Psychologists are doctors (Ph.Ds., Psy.Ds., and Ed.Ds.) who have special training and licensing in the various fields of Psychology. There are numerous graduate school fields of study and specialization such as Clinical Psychology, Counseling Psychology, School Psychology, Educational Psychology, Health Psychology, Forensic Psychology, Neuropsychology, and so on. Training and licensing define the appropriate scope of practice. For example, a Ph.D. may have no clinical training and might focus just on academic writing, teaching, and/or research. Certain trained psychologists can evaluate, use psychological tests, diagnose, provide supervision, and provide psychotherapy. In some states (New Mexico, Illinois, and Louisiana but not Texas), psychologists with special training and credentialing can prescribe psychiatric medications. Note that a person may use the term “doctor” but must be licensed by the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists in order to practice legally using the term “Psychologist.” Some mental health professionals and others may have doctoral degrees in other fields but practice under their master’s level license, using the title “doctor” which is potentially misleading to the public.

Psychological Associates (PAs) have a master’s degree in a Psychology field (MAs, MS, and M.Eds. etc.) or have a doctoral degree and are in progress toward licensure at the doctoral level. They are supervised by a psychologist. Licenses for psychologists, PAs, and LSSPs (Licensed Specialists in School Psychology) are managed by the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists. License status can be checked and verified by the public on-line through the board’s website.

Master’s level Psychology students and Psychology interns train under the supervision of licensed psychologists and are actively enrolled in a graduate school program.



Master's Level MH Professionals:

There are other mental health professionals who practice with a master's license. The most common master's level mental health professional license in Texas is the LPC (Licensed Professional Counselor). LPCs have master's degrees in a variety of mental health fields (MAs, MSs, and M.Eds. etc.). They may work independently, may diagnose and may provide counseling (which is the same thing as psychotherapy). LPC-Associates (Licensed Professional Counselor associates) have a master's degree and are in the process of becoming fully licensed. They train under the supervision of an LPC-Supervisor (an LPC who has the credential to provide supervision). These licenses are managed by the Texas State Board of Examiners of Professional Counselors. License status can be checked and verified by the public on-line through the board's website.

Social workers have a master's degree in social work (MSW). They may work independently and may diagnose, provide supervision, and provide counseling or psychotherapy. Their license (LCSW) is managed by the Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners. License status can be checked and verified by the public on-line through the board's website. Social work students train under the supervision of LCSWs and are actively enrolled in graduate schools.

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists (LMFTs) have master's degrees in mental health fields. They mostly provide marriage and family counseling, and their training is in this specialty. License status can be checked and verified by the public on-line through the state board's website. Marriage and Family Therapy students train under the supervision of LMFTs.

Licensed Chemical Dependence Counselors (LCDCs) mostly provide counseling for addictions and their training is in this specialty. These workers may have a master's or bachelor's degree in a mental health field and are often in recovery themselves from some addiction. License status can be checked and verified by the public on-line through the board's website.

Licensed Sex Offender Treatment Providers (LSOTPs) work with people who have been arrested on sexual offenses. These workers usually have master's degrees in the mental health field. CSATs (Certified Sex Addiction Therapists) have special training to work with sex addictions. They usually have master's degrees in a MH field.

**Pastoral Counselors:**

Pastoral counselors usually have a master's degree either in Divinity or Theology or a counseling related field. Some may also have mental health professional licenses. They generally office on a church campus. Many parish priests and deacons do some limited amount of pastoral counseling as their time allows. Other pastoral counselors are lay persons that have some religious background. Pastoral counselors are not licensed and are not regulated by the state. Because many people reach out to their church when in crisis or when first in need of help from someone they trust, pastoral counselors provide a significant amount of mental health service to the community. Many pastoral counselors will refer to mental health professionals when they encounter a situation that is beyond their training or experience or time availability.

School Counselors:

School counselors generally have master's degrees in education or counseling fields but may not always be licensed. School counselors work on mental health issues with children who are in the school where they are employed. They may consult with teachers or school administrators, and with parents. The focus of school counseling may be any issues that are interfering with academic functioning.

Guidance Counselors:

Guidance counselors are similar to school counselors in that they work in schools and focus on academic issues. Guidance counselors may focus less on mental health issues and more on issues like course and career options. They may or may not have counseling degrees.



Spiritual Directors:

The tradition of spiritual direction could be traced back to Jewish prophets and holy men who challenged and encouraged people to lead good lives and worship God. It also goes back to the early Christian Church when people ventured into the desert to consult with monks and hermits who were masters of the spiritual life. In the 17th century, St. Francis de Sales and St. Vincent de Paul made the custom of formal spiritual guidance even more popular. Today, spiritual directors may be religious men and women (priests, deacons, sisters, nuns) or may be trained lay persons. Spiritual Direction is usually focused on a deeper awareness of the spiritual aspect of being human including one's prayer life and faith practices. Spiritual direction is usually offered at churches or retreat centers and sometimes in faith-based universities. Spiritual direction is not counseling but may resemble it in some ways. Some counselors may have formal training in Spiritual Direction and integrate these two functions. Some mental health professionals who work in faith-based settings may also integrate psychology and spirituality.

Bachelor's Level Workers:

People may work in the mental health field with a bachelor's degree in Psychology or Social Work. These jobs are usually associated with an organization such as a hospital or social service agency. These people may serve as case workers, case managers, or psychiatric techs...for example. This level of service is not usually considered to be in the group of "mental health professional." These individuals are unlicensed/unregulated by the state but the organizations they work for are generally licensed/regulated.

Coaches:

A new and growing phenomenon is peer, life, or relationship coaching. Coaching in mental health and addiction recovery is actually being encouraged by the government due to mental health professions shortages, but it is in process as a developing field. There is no licensing of peer coaches and no educational or training requirements. This essentially means that any person can refer to himself or herself as a "coach" and advertise in this way. It is important to note that the public has no protection at this time when consulting with a coach and so there is potential for danger and abuse of the title. Some peer coaches can be very competent and effective when they have education, training, and good supervision...but others may do more harm than good.



Considerations for Making Referrals:

Many people connected with the Church may have a need to make referrals for mental health related issues, including marriage counseling and marriage preparation. Among these who make referrals are clergy and religious, church office staff, those in various ministries around the diocese and in parishes, those in various offices working for the diocese, and those working in other organizations connected with the Church community. The following general guidelines may be helpful:

1. Refer Catholics to a mental health professional who is an actively practicing Catholic. Ask where the mental health professional goes to church and how involved they might be in church activities. Ask if the mental health professional has any differences of opinion about Church teachings.
2. When possible, know and have a relationship with the referral resource.
3. Appropriately solicit and hear feedback from people who have used the referral resource.
4. Go online once a year to check on the license status of the referral resource.
5. Give multiple (3 is a good number) referrals to any person seeking a referral.
6. Be alert for people who have degrees that are not related to counseling but are using them in their title and advertising. This is often confusing to the public.
7. Be aware that once a referred person goes to see a mental health professional, confidentiality may prevent the professional from contacting you...including thanking you for the referral. If you want to know that the person followed through with the referral, ask the person being referred to get back to you after attending the first appointment or two. This also gives you a chance to see what they think about the professional. A counseling relationship is like any other, in that some connections work and others don't seem to fit. If it is not going well with a counselor after several sessions, the client should talk with the counselor about it and/or seek a different resource.
8. If a person is in immediate crisis, consider if you need to involve the police...or if you need to refer the person to a hospital emergency room or crisis psychiatric facility. It is often difficult to get a quick emergency appointment to see a private mental health professional. The police in Texas can make an Emergency Order of Detention (EOD) to have the person evaluated in a hospital for up to 72 hours.



9. Due to COVID-19, nearly all mental health professionals of all the types listed above have begun using video telehealth services. This opens access to mental health services for anyone with a smart phone or Internet connection. Before this innovation, many people, especially in rural areas did not have good access to mental health services because none were in their vicinity. This means that a person in Brownwood, Texas for example, could see by video telehealth a mental health provider who is in Beaumont. Most telehealth users will see clients within the state where they are licensed. However, some state licensing boards are now forming agreements (see PSYPACT) so that video telehealth can be delivered cross state lines, for example between Texas and Oklahoma or between Tennessee and Kentucky.
10. Two good resources for finding Catholic counselors are the membership directory of the Catholic Psychotherapy Association (which the public can access on their website), and the website CatholicTherapists.com.
11. Remember, if you are told about a situation of abuse or neglect (child or vulnerable adult), consider if you need to alert the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and be sure to follow the local diocesan reporting policies as they apply to Church employees or ministry leaders. Those vulnerable children and older adults who experience abuse or neglect usually need counseling services.
12. Counseling services are also important for domestic violence situations (now referred to as "Intimate Partner Violence." No person should remain in a situation of abuse, as this is an affront to their natural human dignity.
13. Marriage counseling can help save marriages and preserve family unity. In situations where there has been infidelity, if both partners are willing to work on their relationship, even these marriages might be saved. In some cases, a marriage therapist will ask spouses to be in individual counseling along with or instead of counseling as a couple. In situations of physical abuse or violence, individual counseling is usually indicated instead of counseling for the couple.
14. Addictions are difficult but not impossible. It is common for a person to have an addiction and mental illness. There is hope for every person. If the person has some motivation to change, he or she might do it with the help of counselors and/or 12-step support groups.