



Joining the Behavioral Health Workforce

Your Guide to Surviving and Thriving in a Demanding Field

You've Got Questions; We've Got Answers.

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What is Behavioral Health?

Behavioral health and mental health is often used interchangeably to describe one's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. According to [Mentalhealth.org](https://www.mentalhealth.org), our mental or behavioral health affects how we feel, think, and act. It also helps to determine how we handle life's stressors, make decisions, and relate to other people. Our behavioral health is important throughout every phase of our lives, from childhood and adolescence, all the way to adulthood. Additionally, our behavioral health has a direct linkage to our physical health and needs just as much care and concern.

People can experience various behavioral health problems due to biological causes and/or significant life events. These problems can affect their thinking, mood, well-being, and overall quality of life.

The individuals who provide various services and work to help individuals overcome these challenges are known as behavioral health professionals. Services rendered by these professionals include, but are not limited to, therapeutic services, medication management, group therapy and family therapy; other services are provided by those with specialized training. We'll describe some of the typical career paths on the following page.



Which Career Path is Right for You?

Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) are mental health professionals trained in psychotherapy and family systems, and licensed to diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders within the context of marriage, couples and family systems.

Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) provide mental health and substance abuse care to millions of Americans. LPCs make up a large percentage of the workforce employed in community mental health centers, agencies, and organizations, and are employed within and covered by managed care organizations and health plans.

Social Workers are professionals who help individuals, families, and groups restore or enhance their capacity for social functioning, and work to create societal conditions that support communities in need.

Psychologists help a wide variety of people and can treat many kinds of problems. Psychologists are also trained to administer and interpret a number of tests and assessments that can help diagnose a condition or tell more about the way a person thinks, feels and behaves.

Psychiatric mental health registered nurses are specialists within the nursing profession. These nurses work with individuals, families, groups, and communities, to assess their mental health needs.

Psychiatrists are physicians who specialize in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental health and emotional problems. Because of extensive medical training, the psychiatrist understands the body's functions and the complex relationship between emotional illness and other medical illness.





Why Does the Field Need Competent and Diverse Professionals?

There are significant health disparities within the field of behavioral health. Approximately **90%** of professionals in the behavioral/mental health field are non-Hispanic Whites. However, minorities make up about **30%** of the country's population and projections for **2060** suggest that minorities will become the majority accounting for **50.4%** of the population. According to a **2004 report by SAMHSA**, the percentages of minorities in the behavioral health field was as follows: **5.5%** for marriage/family therapists, **8.7%** for social work, **6.2%** for psychology, and **24.2 %** for psychiatry (www.apa.org). The need for more diverse professionals is critical.

A key factor in one's mental health status is poverty. African Americans living below the poverty level, as compared to those over twice the poverty level, are 3 times more likely to

report psychological distress. Additionally, the death rate from suicide for Hispanic men was almost five times the rate for Hispanic women, in **2009** (U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services Office of Minority Health).

Cultural competence for behavioral health professionals is essential to an effective and properly trained workforce. All individuals living with behavioral and mental health problems face challenges that are not recognized by those who do not have such problems, but minorities living with mental illness present unique obstacles. To be effective in helping these persons lead satisfying lives, behavioral health professionals must be able to reach the needs of diverse populations of people and understand their specific cultures.



The Minority Fellowship Program

Since its inception in 1973, **the Minority Fellowship Program**, sponsored by SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) has aided **more than 1,000** individuals in receiving funds to further their education and careers in the behavioral health field. Participation in the fellowships is facilitated through the following professional associations and respective disciplines:

- **American Psychological Association**
- **American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy**
- **American Nurses Association**
- **American Psychiatric Association**
- **Council on Social Work Education**
- **National Board for Certified Counselors and Affiliates**
- **NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals**



Networking Opportunities



ADVOCACY

Get involved with the future of the behavioral health field. By participating in advocacy activities.

National Association of Social Workers. Local chapters of NASW host a hill day/advocacy day/ lobby day to pursue the local and national NASW agendas. Students are encouraged to meet with their representatives and practice their advocacy/lobby skills. <http://www.nasw.org>

National Council for Behavioral Health. The Council hosts an annual Hill Day in Washington, DC. In addition, National Council Ambassador Network is open to anyone who shares a passion for strengthening the behavioral health safety net through advocacy and is willing to spend a few extra hours each year to cultivate relationships with U.S. lawmakers. Will you join the movement? <http://www.thenationalcouncil.org/policy-action/ambassador-network/>

CONFERENCES

Active Minds. Active Minds empowers students to change the perception about mental health on college and high school campuses. Get involved with a local chapter and attend the annual conference. <http://www.activeminds.org/>

National Council for Behavioral Health. Each spring, executives, board members, thought leaders, and behavioral health professionals from the nation's community health, mental health, and addiction care organizations come together for this annual event. <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/events-and-training/conference/>

The Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors. Conference attendance fee for student volunteers is minimal and students enter their research projects to present. <http://www.bpdonline.org/>



Student Opportunities

National Association of Social Workers

Social work students can join for a special student rate. Open to anyone currently en-rolled in a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)-accredited social work degree pro-gram or a program eligible for candidacy. Eligibility for the BSW and/or MSW student membership category is limited to four years for each degree over the lifetime of membership (does not need to be continuous). <http://www.socialworkers.org/students/default.asp>

American Counseling Association

ACA student membership provides several benefits. ACA Master's Level students receive liability insurance coverage as part their membership. For just over half the price of

full professional membership, students gain access to all of the career and professional resources available to practicing counselors. To aid students in their course-work, ACA provides 24-hour electronic access to our journal, literature, and other research resources. With these services, ACA can help students prepare for the next chapter in their professional careers. <http://www.counseling.org/membership/aca-and-you/students#sthash.6cOxZlvo.dpuf>

The Association for Addiction Professionals

NAADAC's Mission is to lead, unify and empower addiction focused professionals to achieve excellence through education, advocacy, knowledge, standards of practice, ethics, professional development and

research. Benefits Include: Free continuing education credits, reduced rates for publications, and reduced rates for outside CE classes. <http://www.naadac.org/join>

The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

Students currently enrolled in a graduate marriage and family therapy program, or a closely related mental health program, and who can reasonably be expected to become a Clinical Fellow or member of AAMFT are eligible for student membership in this professional organization. Students can maintain this membership for up to five years and also receives free liability insurance during their membership. http://www.aamft.org/imis15/AAMFT/Content/Membership/Join_AAMFT.aspx



What's Next? After Graduation

This can be a time of shifting emotions. There is much excitement for you future, but there can also be in-tense fear. It's ok! Most of us entering the field have been in your shoes. We're here to help.

BECOMING A LICENSED PROFESSIONAL

Whether you are a social worker, a family and marriage specialist, addiction specialist, or counselor, get licensed! Your college academic advisor should have the information you need to go about taking the proper tests to achieve your license to practice. There are different requirements for different states, so check with a professor or another professional for help.

Being licensed in your field is usually a requirement for most behavioral health jobs. The sooner you do this, the sooner you can increase your employability. It is also recommended to become licensed right after graduation when the textbook knowledge is still fresh!

Practice also makes perfect! Team up with a friend who is also looking to become licensed to practice together. Practice books can be expensive, so having a partner to split the cost and help study with can help ease some stress.

STUDENT LOAN DEBT

The dreaded payback date is quickly approaching... What's next? Search for jobs in the field that offer student loan forgiveness compensation, but make sure to read the fine print! Many forgiveness programs require you to work for the agency for a certain amount of time before you can terminate or transfer to a new position.

In addition, many states offer student loan forgiveness when accepting a position within state government. Log on to: <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/repay-loans/forgiveness-cancellation> to see the options available in your state.

Don't wait! **Many states can revoke your license if you do not repay your student loan debt** within a timely manner. Scan the QR code to see the laws in your state.



What's Next? Higher Education

More school may sound like a pain, but the time spent can increase your paycheck tremendously and open more doors for your career and your employability.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

While additional degrees are not required, you may find that many positions that you would like to apply for require you to have a graduate degree in a related behavioral healthcare field. There are many options available to you if you are looking to explore higher education.

Many universities and colleges that offer graduate degrees also offer graduate assistantship positions that waive all or part of your tuition. When applying to a university, make sure to ask about possible employment opportunities on campus that can help you obtain your goals cost efficiently.

Some agencies or employers may require you to go to school to re-main an employee or to climb up the agency ladder; if this is the case, seek about potential ways they can offer financial compensation for tuition. When looking for a job, asking about opportunities to go back to school and obtain a higher degree in a related behavioral health discipline.

AND BEYOND...

In the mist of all this information and thought of the future, make sure you reflect to the chapter on mindfulness and self care. It is incredibly important for not only your career, but your personal self to pause and reflect on personal growth, accomplishments, pitfalls, strengths and weaknesses. Knowing where your challenges lie and your strengths prevail will help your career ease to where you want it to go.

The behavioral health field is constantly in demand of competent, innovative workers to ensure a better future for individuals in all walks of life. This job may not always be easy, but rewarding nonetheless. Remember when the world may seem overwhelming, that you must start small.

**HELPING JUST ONE PERSON AT A TIME
CAN CHANGE THE WORLD.**



Self-Care and Mindfulness

In any helping profession, there is a risk of burnout. Unhealthy professionals cannot contribute to the health of clients. It is important to take some time to focus on yourself in a positive way. These sections show you how.



Self-Care: Behavioral Health Means a Healthy You, Too

What is self care? When you think about self-care, think about those activities and behaviors that can help you to reduce your stress, and maintain your personal well-being. As simple as it sounds, many helping professionals neglect themselves in favor of their clients, thereby leaving themselves vulnerable to burn-out and compassion fatigue. So, what can you do to keep yourself productive and effective throughout your career? Here are a few (not so) simple tips.

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is the quality or state of being aware of something, but it is more than that. It is intentional and non-judgmental. It means taking the time to observe yourself, know who you are and what you are feeling, and accept everything about you. It does not mean that you never change or grow, but it does mean that you learn to change what you can, while not over-focusing on negative aspects.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

You are your body, and taking care of your body will affect not only how you feel, but how you feel about yourself. How you present yourself will affect how others feel about you, as well. This doesn't mean you need to become a health nut or a professional athlete, but it does mean being mindful of how you eat, how you are active, and how you allow the world to experience you.

MENTAL HEALTH

It is always easier to see out than it is to see in. Behavioral health professionals struggle with many of the same issues that beset everyone else. When you consider issues like reverse transference and secondary trauma, we may be more likely to need to focus on our mental health than the general public. The same caring techniques we use with clients can be applied to ourselves to enhance our job and life satisfaction, which always shows in our effectiveness with clients.



Self-Care and Mindfulness

It is rare that a helping professional takes the time to stop and consider themselves, yet it is one of the most useful tools we have for confronting biases, identifying areas for growth, and recognizing that we are, in fact, human beings.



Mindfulness is Being Aware Without Judging

Practicing mindfulness is simply about noticing yourself and coming to learn about who you are, how you feel, and what you value. It is spending time with yourself in a meaningful and undistracted way. It can also be maddeningly vague and frustrating to begin. Here are a few tips to help get you started.

FIND A QUIET PLACE

It can be your home or apartment, it can be a meditation room, or it can be in a quiet corner of the library. Find somewhere with minimal distractions. Humans are good at noticing environmental changes, so go where these distractions will be minimal.

GET COMFORTABLE

Sit down with a casual presence. You don't have to pose or cross your legs if that is awkward for you. Use good posture, and let your body settle in. You don't have to start with 45-minute sessions, start small with 5 or 10 minutes.

BREATHE

Simple as that, breathe in and out. This is where the posture comes in, you want to be able to breathe easily, without thinking about it. You probably will think about it, now, but that can't be helped. Just breathe.

FOCUS

Choose something to focus on. Many people start with their breathing, but you don't have to. When you feel your mind wander, re-focus. Once you can focus consistently, it's time to turn your attention to your own thoughts and feelings.

Try the following exercise:

Think of a recent stressful experience. Try to remember how you felt, what you did, why you responded the way you did. Track down your motivations and the factors that shaped your behaviors, even from childhood if you can. Do not judge, try not to generate any new emotions. Just examine, just learn from yourself. If you find something you don't like, don't try to change it now. Just observe.



Self-Care and Mindfulness

What you eat, what you do, and how you present yourself can change how you feel and how you see yourself. Take advantage of the control you have over these areas.



You are What You Eat, Among Other Things

Having a long and healthy career requires you to have a long and active life. Unfortunately, Behavioral Health professionals spend much of their work day in sedentary activities, so it becomes vital for us to spend time taking care of our bodies. Three main areas are diet, exercise, and presentation.

DIET

Eating the right diet can help stabilize your mood, promote wellness, and help you sleep better, too. You want to seek out foods that are high in fiber and lean protein, avoiding simple sugars and refined starches. In general, go heavy on the fruits and vegetables, and aim for proteins from nuts and fish. You should avoid excessive caffeine or alcohol intake, and be watchful for saturated fats.

EXERCISE

Proper exercise is all about attitude. You're not punishing yourself, so ignore that "no pain, no gain" nonsense. Exercise

to improve your health, and the weight loss and muscle definition can come later, with consistency and discipline. You also do not need to start strong, start small and work your way up. The [Health.gov](https://www.health.gov) recommends at least 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity exercise, or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise. More is better, of course, but follow these guidelines and you will feel better and look better.

PRESENTATION

How you present yourself matters, from how you feel about yourself to how your clients interact with you. Studies have shown that individuals who pay attention to their environment and present themselves accordingly regularly achieve better results. This dynamic applies to your posture as well, with benefits from improved body posture showing up in measurable ways. So, decide how you want others to see you, and present yourself as someone who is seen in this way. You'll start to see yourself in this light as well.

Self-Care and Mindfulness

It is an easy trap to focus only on the struggles of others, but it is all too often our own struggles that silently steal our ability to enjoy the work that we do. Face your struggles, hold onto your joy.



You Are Not Exempt from Mental Health Needs

Behavioral Health professionals are often exposed to very adverse situations in dealing with clients, and it can be a small step to allow yourself to become entrenched in the struggles you see on a daily basis. Attending to your own mental health needs can help relieve the burden of other peoples' needs. These three competencies can help you help yourself.

AWARENESS

This relates back to mindfulness. Know when you are stressed out, and acknowledge it. Research has shown that humans progress through different stages of awareness as we mature, and we do not always operate at our highest level of development. Take time to notice yourself and practice mindful aware-ness of your own needs.

ACCEPTANCE

Being aware of yourself without accepting who you are is a dangerous proposition. Learn to see that you are human, and that you will struggle from time to time. This is not abnormal,

this is part of what it means to grow as a person. Once you accept who you are, you can work to grow yourself in the areas where you feel you need improvement. You do not need to be perfect, you do not even need to appear perfect. Working toward perfection is never-ending, but it is also enough.

COMPASSION

It is often much easier to be compassionate with others than ourselves. The textbook definition of compassion is to recognize suffering and to work to relieve it. You can do that for yourself. Be kind to yourself, give yourself some grace, and work toward becoming the person you want to be. Self-care, in a way, really is self-compassion. By following the tips in this and previous sections, as well as in the information provided through the QR codes, you are well on your way to working to relieve your own stress and anxiety. In the end, this will allow you to become the professional and the person you were always capable of becoming.





Project



Project Leadership Initiatives for Tomorrow