Mental Health Counselors and Marriage and Family Therapists

Summary

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists help people manage or overcome mental and emotional disorders and problems with their family and relationships.

Quick Facts: Mental Health Counselors and Marriage and Family Therapists

| 2012 Median Pay          | $41,500 per year  
|                          | $19.95 per hour   |
| Entry-Level Education    | Master's degree   |
| Work Experience in a Related Occupation | None |
| On-the-job Training      | Internship/residency |
| Number of Jobs, 2012     | 166,300           |
| Job Outlook, 2012-22     | 29% (Much faster than average) |
| Employment Change, 2012-22 | 48,200            |

What Mental Health Counselors and Marriage and Family Therapists Do

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists help people manage and overcome mental and emotional disorders and problems with their family and relationships. They listen to clients and ask questions, to help the clients understand their problems and develop strategies to improve their lives.

Work Environment

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists work in a variety of settings, such as private practice and mental health centers. Most work full time.

How to Become a Mental Health Counselor or Marriage and Family Therapist

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists typically are required to have a master's degree and a license to practice.

Pay

In May 2012, the median annual wage for mental health counselors was $40,080. The median annual wage for marriage and family therapists was $46,670 in May 2012.

Job Outlook

Employment of mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists is projected to grow 29 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. Growth is expected in both occupations as more people have mental health counseling.
services covered by their insurance policies.

**Similar Occupations**

Compare the job duties, education, job growth, and pay of mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists with similar occupations.

**More Information, Including Links to O*NET**

Learn more about mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists by visiting additional resources, including O*NET, a source on key characteristics of workers and occupations.

**What Mental Health Counselors and Marriage and Family Therapists Do**

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists encourage clients to discuss their emotions and experiences.

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists help people manage and overcome mental and emotional disorders and problems with their family and relationships. They listen to clients and ask questions, to help the clients understand their problems and develop strategies to improve their lives.

**Duties**

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists typically do the following:

- Diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders, such as anxiety and depression
- Encourage clients to discuss their emotions and experiences
- Help clients process their reactions and adjust to changes in their life, such as divorce and layoffs
- Guide clients through the process of making decisions about their future
- Help clients develop strategies and skills to change their behavior and to cope with difficult situations
- Coordinate treatment with other professionals, such as psychiatrists and social workers
- Refer clients to other resources or services in the community, such as support groups or inpatient treatment facilities

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists use a variety of techniques and tools to help their clients. Many apply cognitive behavioral therapy, a goal-oriented approach that helps clients understand harmful thoughts, feelings, and beliefs and replace them with positive, life-enhancing ones. Furthermore, cognitive behavioral therapy teaches clients to eliminate unwanted and damaging behaviors and to replace them with more productive ones.

While some disorders can be overcome, others need to be managed. With the latter, mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists help the client develop strategies and skills to minimize the effects of their disorders or illnesses.

Some mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists work in private practice. They must spend time marketing their practice to prospective clients and working with insurance companies and clients to get payment for their services.

**Mental health counselors** provide treatment to individuals, families, couples, and groups. Some work with specific populations, such as the elderly, college students, or children. Mental health counselors deal with a variety of issues, including anxiety, depression,
grief, low self-esteem, stress, and suicidal impulses. They also help with mental and emotional health issues and relationship problems.

**Marriage and family therapists** work with individuals, couples, and families. Unlike other types of mental health professionals, they bring a family-centered perspective to treatment, even when treating individuals. They evaluate family roles and development, to understand how clients’ families affect their mental health. They treat the clients’ relationships, not just the clients themselves. They address issues, such as low self-esteem, stress, addiction, and substance abuse.

### Work Environment

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists held about 166,300 jobs in 2012.

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists work in variety of settings, such as mental health centers, substance abuse treatment centers, hospitals, and colleges. They also work in private practice and in Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), which are mental health programs that some employers provide, to help employees deal with personal problems.

Mental health counselors held about 128,400 jobs in 2012. The industries that employed the most mental health counselors in 2012 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nursing and residential care facilities</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outpatient care centers</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual and family services</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals; state, local, and private</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marriage and family therapists held about 37,800 jobs in 2012. The industries that employed the most marriage and family therapists in 2012 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual and family services</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outpatient care centers</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices of health practitioners</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing and residential care facilities</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Working with and assisting clients with a variety of emotional and mental problems may be stressful.

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists occasionally may travel to meet clients and patients.

### Work Schedules
Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists generally work full time. Because counseling sessions are scheduled to accommodate clients who may have job or family responsibilities, some counselors and therapists work evenings and weekends.

How to Become a Mental Health Counselor or Marriage and Family Therapist

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists are typically required to have a master’s degree and a license to practice.

**Education**

To become a mental health counselor or a marriage and family therapist, applicants typically need a master’s degree in psychology, social work, counseling, marriage and family therapy, or a related mental health field. A bachelor’s degree in most fields is acceptable to enter a master’s-level program.

Counseling programs prepare students to recognize symptoms of mental and emotional disorders and to use effective counseling strategies. Marriage and family therapy programs teach students about how marriages, families, and relationships function and how they affect mental and emotional disorders.

**Licenses**

In most cases, both mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists must be licensed. Licensure requires a master’s degree and 2,000 to 4,000 hours of post-degree supervised clinical experience. In addition, counselors and therapists must pass a state-recognized exam and complete annual continuing education classes.

Contact information for state boards regulating mental health counselors is available through the [National Board for Certified Counselors](http://www.nbcc.org). Contact and licensing information for marriage and family therapists is available through the [Association of Marital and Family Therapy Regulatory Boards](http://www.aamft.org).

**Training**

In most cases, both mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists must be licensed. Licensure requires a master’s degree and 2,000 to 4,000 hours of post-degree supervised clinical experience. Students gain experience in providing family therapy, group therapy, psychotherapy and other therapeutic interventions, under the supervision of a licensed counselor.

**Important Qualities**

*Compassion.* Counselors and therapists often work with people who are dealing with stressful and difficult situations, so they must be compassionate and empathize with their clients.

*Interpersonal skills.* Being able to work with different types of people is essential for counselors and therapists, who spend most of their time working directly with clients and other professionals and must be able to encourage good relationships.

*Listening skills.* Good listening skills are essential for mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists, both of whom need to give their full attention to their clients to understand their problems and values.
Organizational skills. Good organizational skills are especially important for counselors and therapists in private practice, who must keep track of payments and work with insurance companies.

Speaking skills. Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists need to be able to communicate with clients effectively. They must express ideas and information in a way that clients can understand easily.

Pay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental Health Counselors and Marriage and Family Therapists</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median annual wages, May 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marriage and family therapists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$46,670</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$41,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental health counselors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,080</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total, all occupations</td>
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<tr>
<td>$34,750</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.

The median annual wage for mental health counselors was $40,080 in May 2012. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $25,430, and the top 10 percent earned more than $66,630.

In May 2012, the median annual wages for mental health counselors in the top five industries in which these counselors worked were as follows:

- Government $48,060
- Hospitals; state, local, and private 43,190
- Outpatient care centers 40,250
- Individual and family services 40,200
- Nursing and residential care facilities 32,530

The median annual wage for marriage and family therapists was $46,670 in May 2012. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $25,540, and the top 10 percent earned more than $75,120.

In May 2012, the median annual wages for marriage and family therapists in the top five industries in which these therapists worked were as follows:

- Government $61,230
- Offices of health practitioners 45,090
- Outpatient care centers 44,130
- Individual and family services 41,960
- Nursing and residential care facilities 37,450

Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists generally work full time. Because counseling sessions are scheduled to accommodate clients who may have job or family responsibilities, some counselors and therapists work evenings and weekends.

**Job Outlook**

### Employment of Mental Health Counselors and Marriage and Family Therapists

Employment of mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists is projected to grow 29 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. Growth is expected in both occupations as more people have mental health counseling services covered by their insurance policies.

Federal legislation mandating individual health coverage may increase the number of health insurance customers. In addition, the law requires insurance plans to cover treatment for mental health issues in the same way as other chronic diseases. These two factors will open up prevention and treatment services to more people who were previously uninsured, did not have these services covered, or found treatment to be cost-prohibitive. Mental health centers and other treatment and counseling facilities will need to hire more mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists, to meet this increased demand.

In addition, the number of military veterans needing and seeking mental health treatment is expected to increase over the next decade. The federal government, community clinics, and local hospitals will need to expand their mental health counseling staff, to provide timely and effective treatment for veterans and active duty personnel.

Furthermore, increasing numbers of people are expected to seek treatment for problems with mental and emotional problems than in earlier decades. As the population grows, the number of individuals entering therapy is expected to increase, as well. This trend will cause continued demand for counselors in mental health centers, hospitals, and colleges.

### Job Prospects

Job prospects should be good for mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists, particularly in rural areas typically underserved by mental health practitioners.

### Employment Projections Data for Mental Health Counselors and Marriage and Family Therapists, 2012-22

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>166,300</td>
<td>214,500</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.
## Similar Occupations

This table shows a list of occupations with job duties that are similar to those of mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>JOB DUTIES</th>
<th>ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION</th>
<th>2012 MEDIAN PAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physicians and Surgeons</strong></td>
<td>Physicians and surgeons diagnose and treat injuries or illnesses. Physicians examine patients; take medical histories; prescribe medications; and order, perform, and interpret diagnostic tests. They counsel patients on diet, hygiene, and preventive healthcare. Surgeons operate on patients to treat injuries, such as broken bones; diseases, such as cancerous tumors; and deformities, such as cleft palates.</td>
<td>Doctoral or professional degree</td>
<td>This wage is equal to or greater than $187,200 per year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychologists</strong></td>
<td>Psychologists study cognitive, emotional, and social processes and human behavior by observing, interpreting, and recording how people relate to one another and their environments.</td>
<td>See How to Become One</td>
<td>$69,280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rehabilitation Counselors</strong></td>
<td>Rehabilitation counselors help people with emotional and physical disabilities live independently. They work with clients to overcome or manage the personal, social, and professional effects of disabilities on employment or independent living.</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>$33,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School and Career Counselors</strong></td>
<td>School counselors help students develop social skills and succeed in school. Career counselors assist people with the process of making career decisions, by helping them choose a career or educational program.</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>$53,610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social and Community Service Managers</strong></td>
<td>Social and community service managers coordinate and supervise social service programs and community organizations. They direct and lead staff who provide social services to the public.</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>$59,970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social and Human Service Assistants</strong></td>
<td>Social and human service assistants help people get through difficult times or get additional support. They assist other workers, such as social workers, and they help clients find benefits or community services.</td>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>$28,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Workers</strong></td>
<td>Social workers help people solve and cope with problems in their everyday lives. One group of social workers, clinical social workers, also diagnose and treat mental, behavioral, and emotional issues.</td>
<td>See How to Become One</td>
<td>$44,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Substance Abuse and Behavioral Disorder Counselors

Substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors advise people who suffer from alcoholism, drug addiction, eating disorders, or other behavioral problems. They provide treatment and support to help the client recover from addiction or modify problem behaviors.

High school diploma or equivalent $38,520

Contacts for More Information

For more information about mental health counselors, visit
American Mental Health Counselors Association

For more information about marriage and family therapists, visit
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

For general information about counseling and for information about counseling specialties, visit
American Counseling Association

For information about contacting state regulating boards, visit
National Board for Certified Counselors

O*NET

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