

# Licensed Professional Counselors

*Experienced  
and Qualified  
Mental Health Care  
Providers*

## The Counseling Profession

Counselors held approximately 635,000 jobs in the United States in 2006 according to the 2008-2009 *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Counselors work in a variety of settings such as public schools, university counseling and student life programs, mental health centers, rehabilitation programs, substance abuse programs, corrections, churches, hospitals, company-based employee assistance programs, insurance companies, and in private counseling and psychotherapy practice. Counselors assist people with personal, family, mental health, social, educational, and career decisions, problems, and concerns.

The counseling profession has a foundation of humanistic and holistic values and beliefs. ***Basic philosophical underpinnings of the counseling profession include the holistic nature of people, the uniqueness of each individual, the strength of multicultural pluralism, mental health and personal growth, self-responsibility, and social and vocational involvement for individuals with mental and physical disorders.***

## The Mental Health Team

Licensed Professional Counselors are part of an interdisciplinary mental health team which also includes psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, clinical social workers, and marriage and family therapists. ***These mental health professionals typically share theories and techniques and provide similar assessment, counseling (individual, group, marital and family) and other psychotherapeutic services to treat individuals with mental disorders and related problems within both public and private practice settings.*** Although each professional mental health discipline provides a similar core of mental health services, each mental health discipline has some areas of practice where they have special expertise. For example, psychiatrists are physicians with a specialization in psychiatry. Thus psychiatrists tend to practice from a medical model which utilizes prescription drugs, in addition to psychotherapy. Psychologists, in addition to providing psychotherapy services, have special expertise in the administration and interpretation of psychological tests. Marriage and family counselors/therapists specialize in providing counseling and psychotherapy to couples and families. Clinical social workers and psychiatric nurses tend to provide general mental health and case management services.

**What are the special expertise areas of Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs)?** LPCs provide mental health assessment, counseling (individual, group, marriage, and family therapy) and other psychotherapeutic services to treat individuals with mental disorders and related mental health concerns much like the other mental health professionals. However, ***LPCs have special expertise in at least three areas. The first area of expertise is the level of clinical counseling and psychotherapy skills*** developed through university-based curriculum as well as supervised field-based counseling and related mental health practices in accredited counselor education programs. ***Secondly, LPCs are prepared to operate from a broad-based personal growth and developmental model (as well as the medical/disease model)*** which prepares counselors/psychotherapists to help individuals and their families with the common problems and stresses of living, as well as the more severe mental disorders. ***Finally, LPCs have numerous counselor specialty areas, each with its own established standards, examination, and certification within the counseling profession.*** For example, many LPCs have earned specialty certifications in clinical mental health counseling (CCMHC), rehabilitation counseling (CRC),

marriage and family counseling/therapy (CMFT or CFT), and addictions counseling (Licensed Clinical Addictions Specialist: LCAS, or MAC; Master Addictions Counselor). Although all the mental health care professionals provide clinical assessment, counseling (individual, group, marriage and family therapy) and other psychotherapeutic services, each professional discipline has its unique areas of expertise.

## **Scope of Licensed Professional Counseling Practice**

The scope of practice for qualified Licensed Professional Counselors includes, but is not limited to the following:

- Assessment and diagnosis of an individual’s mental health and personal characteristics, assets, and limitations through clinical interviews and/or the administration and interpretation of tests.
- Clinical individual, group, marital, and family counseling and psychotherapy services.
- Treatment of mental disorders and related personal, family, interpersonal, and vocational concerns.
- Development of counseling and treatment goals and plans.
- Case management and coordination of related health, mental health, and rehabilitation services.
- Career assessment and counseling services.
- Counselor supervision, training, and education.
- Administration of counseling and related mental health and rehabilitation programs.
- Research in counseling, psychotherapy, mental health, and related health care areas.
- Consultations on mental health and counseling related issues to other health care providers, human service providers, school personnel, and community organizations.

Many LPCs receive specialty training and certification and may limit their scope of counseling and psychotherapy practices to specialty areas of practice. The LPC code of ethics requires that professional services be limited to those activities for which they are trained to perform. In some states, restrictive regulatory laws may prevent professional counselors from providing some of the professional services listed above.

## **Who Can Benefit From Professional Counseling and Psychotherapy?**

Anybody with mental health concerns can benefit from professional counseling services including people experiencing: the stress of every day living; situational problems of living such as the loss of a loved one; vocational concerns; problems in their interpersonal relationships; problems with family members; alcohol and other substance abuse; and most mental disorders and illnesses (e.g. depression and anxiety disorders). Approximately 54 million individuals in the United States have a physical or mental disability. It is estimated that one in five people will seek the therapeutic services of mental health professionals sometime during their lives.

*The impact of certain disabilities, substance abuse, and mental disorders, is so pervasive, complex, and challenging that many of these individuals could benefit from professional counseling and psychotherapy services.*

## **What Can Clients Expect If They Seek Services From A LPC?**

One of the first items a client can expect to receive from the LPC is a “*professional disclosure statement*”, which is also on file at the state professional counselor licensure board. It typically describes: the counselor’s highest relevant academic degree, the name of the institution granting

the degree; any specialty training and certifications; the number of years of counseling experience; the types of clients served; and the length of sessions (typically 50 minute individual sessions and 60 to 90 minute group, marriage and family sessions). It also includes the fee schedule, methods of payment, information about billing and insurance reimbursement, confidentiality, and how and where to register a complaint. The Professional Disclosure Statement is signed by both client and counselor and a copy is given to the client.

**Counselor-Client Relationship and Process.** The counselor will attempt to create a therapeutic climate where the client feels comfortable talking about personal concerns that the individual or family members find troubling. Counselor empathy, warmth, caring, genuineness, and confidentiality facilitate the development of a trusting therapeutic relationship and increase the probability of a positive and successful therapeutic outcome.

***Counseling and psychotherapy requires the active involvement of clients, including effort to change any self-defeating thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.*** The client will usually be asked to work both in and out of the therapeutic counseling sessions. There will likely be homework and other therapeutic assignments. Exercises and assignments will often focus on such areas as improving stress management and coping skills, belief systems, relationships, and general lifestyle. Sometimes change is relatively easy but more often change takes much effort, time and persistence. It is not uncommon for some psychological and behavior patterns to have been reinforced for 20 to 30 years and will not change easily and quickly. Most professional counselors utilize an eclectic therapeutic counseling approach drawing from well established, researched and respected therapies. Some counselors specialize in one type of theoretical counseling approach (e.g. behavioral therapy).

## **Preparation of the Licensed Professional Counselor**

***Licensed Professional Counselors are prepared at the master's and doctoral degree levels.*** Counseling graduate students often have undergraduate degrees in psychology, rehabilitation services, social work, education, and other health and human service fields.

**Curriculum.** Graduates from accredited counselor education programs are typically trained in clinical assessment procedures; counseling theory and practice; individual, group, and family counseling approaches and techniques; career assessment and counseling; personal growth and development (normal and abnormal); social and cultural foundations; case coordination and management; research and program evaluation; treatment planning; professional ethics and standards; and a supervised 100 hour counseling practicum and 600 hour internship. In addition, students often take required or elective courses in such areas as advanced individual and group counseling/therapy; marriage and family counseling/therapy; advanced psychological testing; psychopathology; personality theory; stress management; job placement; substance abuse; and supervision and administration.

**Counselor Specialization.** ***Many LPCs have received specialty training in addition to their general counselor education.*** Preservice specialty preparation, which usually requires a minimum of 12 semester hours of university credit specifically in the specialty area and supervised counseling experience is offered in counselor education programs in rehabilitation counseling; mental health counseling; substance abuse counseling; gerontological counseling; marriage and family counseling; school counseling; career counseling; vocational evaluation; employee assistance counseling; college counseling; community counseling; and administration. Professional counselors may also pursue post-graduate specialty training in such areas as gestalt

therapy, reality therapy, transactional analysis, rational-emotive therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and hypnotherapy.

## **Counselor Education Program Accreditation**

**Master's Degree Programs.** *There are two national accreditation organizations that set the preparation standards for university-based counselor education programs.* The **Council On Rehabilitation Education (CORE)**, established in 1971, is the oldest national accreditation body in the counseling field and sets the standards for preparing master's degree level rehabilitation counselors. There are approximately 100 college and university-based rehabilitation counselor education programs accredited by CORE. The **Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)**, established in 1981, sets the standards and accredits master's degree level programs in six specific program areas in the revised standards that become effective July 1, 2009. These six areas of counseling include Addiction Counseling; Career Counseling; Clinical Mental Health Counseling; Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling; School Counseling; and Student Affairs and College Counseling. Both CORE and CACREP have similar counselor preparation standards, with CORE requiring general counseling as well as additional standards related to physical and psychiatric disorders and disabilities. **Both require a minimum of 48 semester hours of specified graduate credit, 100 hours of supervised counseling practicum, and 600 hours of internship experience for accreditation. Counselor education programs have specialty preparation standards that typically require a minimum of 12 semester hours of specialty specific training and supervised counseling experience.** The master's degree is considered the professional practice degree in the counseling profession. Graduates from CORE or CACREP accredited counselor education programs are as qualified and skilled as those from related mental health professional disciplines.

**Doctoral Degree Programs.** CACREP also accredits and sets the standards for doctoral degree level counselor education programs. CACREP has accredited 53 doctoral programs in Counselor Education and Supervision as of 2008. **Doctoral programs require a minimum of two years of additional course work and internship requirements after the master's degree.** Counselors who pursue their doctorates typically earn them in counseling or rehabilitation counseling through counselor education departments or in counseling or rehabilitation psychology through psychology departments. Counselors usually pursue the doctoral degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.) in order to become a university professor, administrator, researcher, to receive further clinical training, and/or to achieve advanced professional status and credentials.

## **Counselor Licensure**

Licensure is a state activity and counselor education program accreditation and counselor certifications are national in scope. **All 50 states and the District of Columbia have counselor licensure or related regulatory laws for the practice of counseling and/or the use of the counselor title. All state counselor licensure laws require a minimum of a graduate degree in counseling or a closely related area, supervised work experience, and the passing of an approved examination.** In addition, most states require a minimum number of graduate credit hours of counselor training (usually 48 to 60 semester credit hours) and two to three years of post master's degree supervised counseling experience in order to become licensed. **Professional counselors must be licensed in order to practice independently and enter private practice in those states that have counselor licensure laws.**

## Counselor Specialty Certifications

Depending on each state counselor regulatory legislation, becoming state *licensed* as a professional counselor lets the public know that the counselor is qualified to provide general mental health assessments, counseling, and other psychotherapeutic services to treat individuals with mental disorders and related mental health issues. National counselor *certifications* indicate those specialty areas of counseling and psychotherapy that the counselor has received additional training and supervised counseling experience, in addition to the general counselor preparation standards. There are two main national counselor certifying bodies. The ***Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC)***, established in 1973, is the oldest national certification body in the counseling field. The CRCC sets the standards and offers the certification for rehabilitation counselors (CRC). There are approximately 16,000 CRCs. The ***National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC)***, established in 1982, sets the standards and offers four certifications including general counseling (NCC; National Certified Counselor) and the specialty areas of clinical mental health counseling (CCMHC), addictions counseling (MAC), and school counseling (NCSC). NBCC has certified approximately 42,000 counselors. All states require school counselors to hold state school counseling certification. There are other national and state organizations and agencies that have set standards and offer certifications to qualified counselors in such areas as marriage and family therapy, substance abuse counseling, case management, vocational evaluation, career counseling, disability management, transactional analysis, pastoral counseling, and hypnotherapy. The state counselor licensure boards as well as the NBCC and CRCC require an examination to achieve their credentials and continuing education in order to maintain them. Counselors follow the code of ethics associated with their respective licensure and certification boards.

## For Additional Information

### Counselor Licensure

- **American Association of State Counseling Boards.** [www.aascb.org](http://www.aascb.org). Lists contact information of all state counselor licensure boards.

### Accreditation of Counselor Education Programs

- **Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP).** [www.cacrep.org](http://www.cacrep.org). CACREP is an independent agency recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to accredit master's degree programs in addiction counseling; career counseling, clinical mental health counseling; marital, couple, and family counseling; school counseling; student affairs and college counseling; and doctoral degree programs in counselor education and supervision (according to revised standards that go into effect July 1, 2009). CACREP provides a list of accredited counselor education programs offering master's and doctoral degrees in counseling. The CACREP Website lists contact information for related counseling organizations including professional associations, accreditation, and certification.
- **Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE).** [www.core-rehab.org](http://www.core-rehab.org). CORE is an independent agency recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to accredit master's degree programs in rehabilitation counseling and maintains a current list of accredited rehabilitation counselor education programs and registered undergraduate programs on their website. The CORE website lists contact information for related counseling organizations including professional associations, accreditation, and

certification contact information.

### **Certification of Counselors**

- **National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC).** [www.nbcc.org](http://www.nbcc.org). NBCC certifies general counselors (NCC), clinical mental health counselors (CCMHC), school counselors (NCSC), and addictions counselors (MAC: Master Addictions Counselor) in the United States.
- **Commission On Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC).** The CRCC sets the certification standards for rehabilitation counselors (CRC and CRC-MAC) in the United States and Canada. [www.crccertification.com](http://www.crccertification.com).

### **Professional Association**

- **American Counseling Association (ACA).** [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org). ACA is the largest association of professional counselors, and includes 19 specialty divisions for counselors. The ACA website includes many links to related counseling organizations and the counselor code of ethics adopted by most state counselor licensure boards.
- **Other Professional Counseling Associations.** There are numerous professional associations for most specialty areas of counseling that are independent of the American Counseling Association. Most are listed and “hot linked” on the ACA, CACREP, CORE, NBCC, and CRCC websites.

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