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CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Counseling with an emphasis on human development across the life span, prevention, and wellness is the purview of clinical mental health counselors. Your work with individuals and groups can address a spectrum of mental and emotional disorders; however, your focus remains understanding client behaviors and specific events within the context of their lived experience in order to promote the mental and emotional health of the people you serve. In order to do so, you may choose to support individuals dealing with issues associated with addictions and substance abuse; family, parenting, and marital problems; physical health concerns; stress management; self-esteem; aging; depression and anxiety; grief and loss; trauma; and psychopathology. Through education and counseling, you guide your clients in identifying their strengths and resources as they learn to manage their concerns more effectively and live more fulfilling lives.

You may work alone, counseling individuals, couples, families, or groups, or you may work as part of a group practice or an interdisciplinary team, collaborating with physicians, social workers, health educators, and others to treat illness and promote overall wellness. Clinical mental health counselors work in a variety of settings including community-based mental health centers, hospitals and other treatment centers, education, government agencies, residential treatment facilities, prisons, or employee assistance organizations.

To sum it up, as a clinical mental health counselor you will

- collect information about individuals or clients, using interviews, case histories, observational techniques, and other assessment methods;

- counsel individuals, families, or groups to help them understand problems, deal with crisis situations, define goals, develop realistic action plans in order to effectively manage transitions and achieve personal, social, educational, or vocational developmental milestones;
- diagnose psychopathology and develop and execute treatment plans based on clients' abilities and needs; and
- document patient information including session notes, progress notes, referrals, and recommendations.

SALARY AND JOB OUTLOOK

In order to be inclusive in this very broad category, we will look at the BLS information for both mental health counselors and counseling psychologists. While educational differences account for variations in salary and job outlook, it is important to recognize that master's-prepared counselors with experience and/or certifications will increase their income as well as the demand for their services.

Currently, the median salary for mental health counselors is \$42,840, with top salaries in the \$70,100 range. As of 2016, there were approximately 157,700 mental health counselors working in a variety of industries. The field has a projected higher than average growth rate of 20 percent through 2026 (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2017a). Please see Chapter 5 for a list of industries with the highest employment levels for mental health counselors.

The average salary for counseling psychologists is \$73,270, with top salaries reaching \$121,610 annually. As of 2016, there were approximately 147,500 counseling psychologists working in a variety of industries. This occupation also has a projected growth rate of 14 percent (BSL, 2017b).

Elementary, secondary and higher education, and private practice provide the greatest number of jobs for counseling psychologists.

BEST PREPARATION

Clinical mental health counseling attracts a range of practitioners in terms of education, focus of experience, and the types of environments that offer employment. To that end, it is critical to use information interviews, field research, volunteer involvement, and work experience to help you determine the specifics of the work you want to do including the populations you are most interested in working

with, the environments that best suit your clinical approach and worldview, and the educational preparation (master's or PhD in counseling psychology) that will best suit your aspirations.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The National Board of Certified Counselors offers the following certifications:

- National Certified Counselor (NCC) (<http://www.nbcc.org/Certification/NCC>)
- Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselor (CCMHC) (<http://www.nbcc.org/Certification/SpecialtyCertifications>)

The American Mental Health Counselors Association is the first association to recognize both advanced practice and professional expertise in clinical mental health counseling. The term “clinical mental health counselor” applies to all individuals licensed to practice clinical counseling regardless of their official state title (<http://www.amhca.org/career/diplomate>).

- AMHCA Diplomate and Clinical Mental Health Specialist
- AMHCA Diplomate, Specialist in Trauma Counseling

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Counseling Association	https://www.counseling.org/
American Mental Health Counselors Association	http://www.amhca.org/home

MEET THE EXPERTS

Because of the breadth and depth of this arena of counseling, two practitioners have offered their views on the field. They are different in terms of their background, education, and vocational focus and will provide you with a sense of the scope of the work of a clinical mental health counselor.

Meet Kenneth Jackson, PhD, HSPP, NCC

What has your career trajectory been? What prompted your decision to become a counselor?

I was the first in my family to go to college and had to learn to navigate it on my own. I began my freshman year of college at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh in the commercial art program. Realizing this course of study was not for me, I withdrew from school. The following fall I went to a liberal arts college, pursuing a fine arts major with an education degree. I also enrolled in numerous psychology courses.

After college and an unsuccessful search for teaching positions, I enrolled in a training program for cosmetology. In my work as a cosmetologist on Chicago's Northshore, I specialized in color and design. All day I encountered people with interesting life stories; some that included life dilemmas. As the years of work continued, I developed interpersonal confidence and competence and became a skilled tertiary helper; but I wanted to become more proficient. I discovered the emerging field of counseling and enrolled at Northeastern Illinois University's master's in counseling program, one of the first CACREP-accredited programs in the area. My clinical internship was at an inpatient hospital program for substance abuse. I found it challenging but also rewarding, and my desire to apply to PhD programs grew.

I became a student at large in the counseling psychology program at Loyola University Chicago. In a side conversation with my mentor, he encouraged me to apply for the doctoral program. The serendipity of the situation remains cornerstone to my current profession. I explained that I had applied, but I had not heard anything back. On the face of it, my candidacy was not as competitive as other applicants; however, the professor encouraged the selection committee to at least meet me. Of the nearly 300 applicants, 15 were selected for on-site interviews, which included a presentation of research interests. Five applicants made up that year's cohort, and I was very fortunate to receive an offer, which I accepted with immense gratitude.

My exposure to an expanding diversity of clients was cornerstone to my training experience. My clinical experience during my PhD program included a cooperative site providing counseling services at an outpatient methadone clinic for probation/parole clients, career counseling for students and alumni at Loyola's Career Center, and inpatient hospital work with adolescents and with substance abuse. My final clinical internship was at a north suburban Department of Health and Human Service. The training included psychological

assessment and outpatient community mental health services. I worked with adolescents and adults across the life span on various mental health concerns including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and academic challenges related to learning disorders and/or ADHD. The site also provided couples and family therapy and community outreach.

Upon graduation, I began working on securing my post-doctoral training and hours for licensure at a community mental health agency. Later, I secured a job with Chicago Public Schools as a school counselor. I worked in that position as I also developed a private practice. While I was working as a school counselor, I secured my administrators' certification in Illinois and left Chicago Public Schools for a suburban high school district.

Given my background in education, clinical training, administrative credentials, and licenses, I next applied for and was offered the position of director of counseling at Purdue University Calumet in Hammond, Indiana.

What is your current job and professional title? How long have you been doing this type of work?

My job title is executive director of the counseling center at Purdue University Northwest. I have been in this role for 11 years. My primary role is first and foremost as a psychologist providing clinical mental health services, supervision of outreach services, and structure of office function with regard to caseload of clinicians. I also supervise staff psychologists, doctoral externs and a post-doctoral trainee, and the Disability Access Center director. Additionally, I serve as a member of the Behavior Intervention Team (BIT) in a consultant role pertaining to students who exhibit threatening behavior to the campus community. My role also includes consulting with residential housing professionals; working closely with the conduct officer, dean of students, and faculty regarding specific students of concern; and providing training on various topics based on faculty request.

Over the years of being in the job, I have established an awareness of the need for data and designed systems for gathering data that are useful in developing and evaluating programs and services, creating annual reports, and sustaining funding for the effectiveness of the counseling center.

Please describe the environment you work in. What are some of the pros and cons of the environment?

The work environment is a separate and private office location for the Counseling Center that provides a measure of confidentiality to our students who use

the on-campus counseling services. The office is “off the beaten path” and thus is somewhat separated from other student services offices. The work is largely one on one with student clients and can contribute to a sense of and experience of isolation from colleagues given that we work primarily with students and behind closed doors. The day is structured with any perceived “down time” allocated to doing clinical notes, which involves more sitting at a computer keyboard.

Please describe a typical day/week at your job.

There really is no typical day on the job—except to say that it is always variable. Of course, there are scheduled appointments, meetings, and trainings but there are also almost always unexpected things that occur that may pull me away from planned activities. We provide crisis walk-in service for students, and there are occasions when we also have a student who expresses suicidal ideation and we must respond immediately.

What are the best and worst parts of your job and profession?

The best part of the job is working with students, both those who are enrolled as students at the university and those doctoral practicum externs from doctoral programs from Chicago-area universities and professional schools of psychology. I also work with some great professionals in my office and across the university who are colleagues and friends. I can rely upon them for their professional perspective and direction on various topics and/or initiatives.

Another great aspect of the job is working with early career psychologists (doctoral students) each year. Our selected trainees have been men and women who are African American, Caucasian, Asian, South Asian, straight and LGBT, and international students. The diversity of race and culture expands our experiences as a group, and the early careerist brings new and exciting perspectives of what is going on in research and training in psychology.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the job is that the university is located in a National Shortage area for mental health. Many of our students come with mental health concerns that have never been identified or treated. Additionally, many students may have unidentified disabilities that make the demands of independent learning difficult. Often, our students do not have insurance or the financial resources to access medical care.

Shrinking budgets is another area that is challenging in that there has been a documented increase in demand and severity of mental health concerns on college campuses.

What would have been helpful to know when you first embarked upon this career?

I am doing what I have trained to do in terms of my professional role as a psychologist. The challenges are from the administrative aspects of the job. Things in higher education have become increasingly more complex in the years that I have been working at the university.

What should individuals exploring this career consider in order to make the best decision?

Do the research to understand the education and professional commitment becoming a counseling psychologist requires. The doctoral degree in psychology is the entry into the profession. There is another hurdle to clear, however, to function as an independent psychologist: one year of post-doctoral work under the supervision of a licensed psychologist. Once that year of post-doctoral training is complete, one is eligible to apply for the EPPP licensing exam to become a licensed psychologist. Once licensed, one can begin to work independently (without the clinical supervision of a licensed psychologist).

What is the best preparation for individuals considering this field?

If someone is interested in working in higher education at a college/university counseling center, it is best to do clinical training practicum, the full-time internship year, and/or post-doctoral training working in a college/university counseling center. With specialized work in a college/university counseling center, one can become a viable candidate for employment in higher education. It is noteworthy that working in higher education is often not as highly paid as in a private group practice.

I opted to develop a private practice as well (nights and Saturdays). It provides a different focus of practice (for me, I see high-functioning adults across the life span), which I enjoy. A private practice requires a license and a source of income to pay the initial bills. One usually starts by office share in other practice spaces. If you join a private practice, it's helpful to have an attorney review the contract, particularly if it has a "no compete" clause that may limit your location options if you open your own practice later.

In a private practice, the ability to bill insurance for services is essential. You will need to have the psychologist license, malpractice insurance, an EIN (Employer Identification Number, for business tax purposes), and an NPI number (national provider). The application review process to become credentialed with insurance companies may take 90–180 days. You will need business

development skills to market and promote your business to potential clients. Collaborating with other professionals through professional and community organizations is a very helpful tool in developing a private practice. Becoming familiar with psychiatrists to whom you can refer is also beneficial in that you may receive some referrals from the psychiatrist for clients seeking and/or interested in psychotherapy in conjunction with a psychotropic medication treatment approach.

(K. Jackson, personal communication, September 15, 2017)

Meet Cindy Montgomery, MEd, LPCC

What has your career trajectory been? What prompted your decision to become a counselor?

Growing up in a family of educators, I always knew that I wanted to become a teacher. I loved learning, and school was like a second home for me. I graduated from college with a degree in Liberal Studies, which focused on K–12 education. However, at some point during those four years, I realized that I did not want to be confined to the four walls of a classroom. Instead of teaching, I chose to work in higher education, where I instructed students, faculty, and staff on issues of diversity and broadened their global worldview through cultural immersion experiences abroad.

Upon returning stateside, I spent time evaluating my work experiences and what I enjoyed the most. It was the opportunity it afforded me to talk with individuals one-on-one, to hear their stories, and offer encouragement, support, or advice. I pursued a degree in counseling, so that I was better equipped and qualified to assist students who were going through challenging issues.

Life does not always give you smooth transitions, but I've found that with perseverance, you can get farther than you imagined. I returned to my home state with my master's in counseling, only to be met with licensing challenges. I enrolled in an LPCC Re-specialization certificate program to meet state requirements while once again working in an academic setting. I found myself frequently implementing my counseling skills and knowledge into my daily routine with students. But as life would have it, my family made the choice to move to a new state, which meant new rules and board requirements. I spent time working as a career counselor while pursuing licensure. This further solidified my calling to counsel, and as a result, I chose to leave higher education to pursue counseling in an agency setting.

What is your current job and professional title? How long have you been doing this type of work?

I currently work as a Christian counselor for a faith-based, nonprofit organization that provides a host of resources and services to the community in respective areas across the state. I provide individual, couples, and family counseling to a diverse range of clientele primarily for general mental health issues. I have been working as a counselor in this capacity for a little over a year now.

Please describe the environment(s) you work in. What are some of the pros and cons of the environment(s)?

I serve at two locations in the Phoenix metro area. Both offices are in low-income urban neighborhoods and cater to meeting the needs of individuals and families primarily living on public assistance. We provide clothing, food, parenting support, a pregnancy center, computer assistance, and a resource center. We also offer counseling services, foster care and adoption services, and parent aides.

It was a privilege to start counseling services at our southern office, as this service had not previously been offered at this location. This office functions out of a church, and the individuals who frequent services here are often living at or below the poverty level. Given limited staff and resources, I not only counsel, but I also conduct all the administrative tasks at this location. The need for counseling here is great, however, it is often seen as taboo and/or people have a distorted view of counseling that hinders them from seeking services.

Our central office is located in an actual office building, close to more affluent neighborhoods. As a result, my clientele is more diverse in terms of ethnic and cultural background and socioeconomic status. Although half of my client roster uses a sliding fee scale, I have more clients at our central office who pay the standard rate, which is still much lower than other counseling agencies. I also see EAP [employee assistance program] clients from the organization at this location.

Although there are drawbacks to the environment, I greatly appreciate the spirit of service and the commitment to serving those in need with dignity that is found at both locations.

Please describe a typical day/week at your job.

Typically, I open my calendar to check my schedule, pull client files, review my notes from their last session, and make potential notes for the day's session. I typically see three to six clients on a given work day, spending 45–50 minutes with each one. Post-session activities include scheduling the client's next session and completing progress notes. Occasionally, I may conduct assessments, or spend time

researching evidenced-based interventions that may be appropriate for individual clients. Depending on the stage of our counseling relationship, I will also spend time developing counseling goals, treatment planning, and eventually working on their discharge paperwork. When assigned a new client, I collaborate with our administrative assistant to ensure that all billing and intake information is correct. Whenever possible, I review the client's intake packet prior to the start of sessions.

I receive supervision biweekly, and consult with other counselors as needed. Advocacy is also a part of my role, ensuring that my clients receive sufficient sponsorship for necessary services and appropriate referrals.

What are the best and worst parts of your job and profession?

The best part of my profession is the opportunity to walk with clients through difficult seasons of life. It takes a lot of trust and courage to divulge personal matters to a stranger, which is very humbling for me. I count it a great privilege to be invited into the lives of my clients. When they demonstrate in word or action that they trust you, it is the best compliment. I love when I have clients who genuinely want to come each week because they see the value in the work they are doing. I find joy in watching my clients grow, mature, and heal, and in knowing that I am using my gifts and talents to make a positive difference in their lives.

Although I work for a nonprofit organization, the counseling model looks similar to that of a private practice. As counselors, we create our own schedules and determine our availability. As a working mom, I appreciate the flexibility of my job and being able to create a work schedule that supports a healthier work-life balance. Counseling as a profession provides various opportunities and work schedules to meet different lifestyle needs.

The worst part of this profession is wishing you could do more for your clients to help change their situation. Counseling is often used to change the individual, but it may or may not change the situations they face. Given where I work, the need is always great, and counseling does not resolve every situation. Similarly, when clients terminate without communicating, I wonder if there was something more or different I could have done to meet their needs.

What would have been helpful to know when you first embarked upon this career?

It would have been helpful to know the challenges of differing state licensure requirements. When I started my search for graduate programs, I was looking for one that focused more on practice and less on research. I was also looking for a degree that was more general in scope. I was living in California at the time, and

the fact that I could not find a counseling program that was not MFT [marriage and family therapy] or a doctoral program did not set off any red flags. Little did I know that my home state was the last to recognize counseling as a licensed profession, and since an LPCC was not offered at the time, neither were graduate programs in this field.

Returning to California, I discovered that they were still developing licensure requirements for an LPCC, which included additional courses not provided by my graduate institution. I have no regrets in attending my alma mater, but it would have been helpful to learn more about the educational and licensing requirements for the state that I intended to reside and practice in prior to making final decisions about graduate school programs.

What should individuals exploring this career consider in order to make the best decision?

When exploring counseling as a career, or any career for that matter, it is important to do your homework. Spend time learning about the different types of counseling positions available in the field, and the different settings that you can work in. Know your own “why” or purpose for entering this profession; what *known* strengths and interests do you possess that may determine your niche in the field. I would also gain an understanding of the similarities and differences between various behavioral health roles—social workers, licensed counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and so on. There are many options within the behavioral and mental health fields, so knowing each one allows you to make a more informed decision as to what path best suits you.

What is the best preparation for individuals considering this field?

The educational training that you receive from your graduate degree is paramount to setting a foundation for the counseling profession. It really is an opportunity to learn theory and application, but more importantly, it gives you the space to learn about yourself as an individual and as a future counselor. During my graduate experience, I reflected deeply about who I was (my biases and prejudices, my strengths, and my areas for growth), and who I wanted to be as a counselor. It was a starting point for defining who *I* am as a counselor and what I have to offer to each therapeutic relationship.

Second to knowing who you are and what you bring to the field, I believe exposure will give you the best preparation. Whether you glean it from your internship/practicum experience, or in your first few post-grad counseling positions, it is important to be exposed to a range of mental health issues and individuals.

Final thoughts . . . anything else that would be important to know about this work?

Counseling is not an easy profession. We do not get paid to just sit, listen, and offer advice, but rather to enter the worlds of individuals at critical moments in their lives. We have the pleasure of walking through seasons of life with our clients, while always gauging the appropriate balance in our response. We are delicate, direct, empathic, meticulous, challenging, observant, compassionate, confrontational, open, authentic. As counselors, we courageously embark upon journeys that place our clients as the guide, and where the destination is always a mystery. For me fulfillment comes with being present, sticking it out, and seeing where the journey takes us.

(C. Montgomery, personal communication, September 19, 2017)

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