

Sorting Out the Credentials: What's the Difference Between MD, PhD, LCSW, LPC, and all the others?

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There are over 150 abbreviations that you might see following the names of mental health providers. There are, however, only about seven credential abbreviations that you need to look for. (A full list can be found by searching for a page titled “credential abbreviations” at NetworkTherapy.com).

For families searching for help, it is a bit like spinning a roulette wheel. You do not know which type of provider you need or how much they cost, and you do not know which providers are best for which problems, and you don't know who is good and who is bad, so you pick names of people close to where you live, cross your fingers, and start calling.

In other medical specialties, “doctor” almost always means a medical doctor, or MD. But in mental health, doctor can mean a psychiatrist, psychologist, or even a doctor of social work or education. Further, within the category of psychologist, there are three different doctoral paths (PhD, PsyD, and EdD). Some credentials are university degrees (e.g., MD, PhD, MSW), some are state licenses (e.g., LCSW, LPC), some are professional society designations (e.g., RPT), and some are board certifications (e.g., NCC).

There are really only about seven credential abbreviations that you need to worry about. Those seven abbreviations are the seven types of state licenses for who can provide psychotherapy without supervision (MD, DO, EdD, PhD, PsyD, LCSW, LPC, LMFT, and NP). Of these seven, three of them can prescribe medications (MD, DO, and NP (in Louisiana, a medical psychologist [MP] is a fourth type of prescriber). Each has a different training background.

This guide will explain the most common credentials you are likely to see, but keep in mind that there is no single best method to grade quality. The credentials by themselves do not tell you who is best for certain types of problems. Some providers with the least school training can be the best providers and some providers with the most school training can be the wrong providers. All of these different professions are licensed by states to provide psychiatric care, but the industry still lacks a useful way for consumers to make informed decisions about individual providers. This guide can only tell you what the credentials behind their names mean in terms of what kind of training they have had and what they are legally allowed to do. They are listed alphabetically:

- **DO. A Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine** is equivalent to the better-known and more common MD for all intents and purposes and it is recognized in all 50 states. While there are over 140 medical schools in the United States there are about 35 osteopathic medical schools. There are some differences in training between DOs and MDs, but the length, structure, and content of training have been similar for a long time. The major difference is that osteopathic doctors are trained in manual manipulation and emphasize a whole-person lifestyle perspective, but most osteopathic doctors do not use manual manipulation in their daily practice and many MD's integrate whole-person perspectives.
- **EdD. A Doctor of Education** was designed for those who want to be leaders in education. Many EdD degrees are focused on careers in school policy and education administration. You may see some clinicians with this credential who are licensed to practice because their EdD focused on counseling work within schools.

- **LCSW.** A **Licensed Clinical Social Worker** has completed a traditional four-year undergraduate college education, a two-year masters degree, and two years of post-degree practice under supervision. MSW is a university degree (master of social work), which means they have completed the masters education program. Individuals who graduate with MSW degrees go into a wide range of professions, many of which do not include psychotherapy, so during their masters education, they are trained in a wide range of topics, many of which are not focused on diagnosis and treatment. LCSW is a state licensing credential, which means they have achieved the MSW university degree and passed the state requirements of supervised patient care and a written exam. The LCSW license allows them to diagnose and treat mental disorders with counseling and psychotherapy. The number of LCSWs in the United States is around 350,000 (Salsberg et al., 2017).
- **LCSW-BACS.** An LCSW can achieve the additional credential of Board Approved Clinical Supervisor (BACS) which means they have met the state requirements to supervise LMSWs on their path to become LCSWs.
- **LMFT** stands for **Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist**. Individuals are eligible to take a state licensing exam after completing four years of undergraduate education, a two-year master's degree at a university in marriage and family therapy (MFT) and two years of post-degree supervised clinical experience. According to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapists, there are over 50,000 LMFTs in the United States. All 50 states regulate LMFTs with licensing boards.
- **LMSW.** **Licensed Master Social Workers** cannot provide unsupervised clinical therapy, but many LMSWs do provide clinical therapy while they are being supervised for the work experience required to apply for the LCSW. Upon graduation from a two-year master's program in social work with an MSW university degree, individuals can take the Association of Social Work Board's exam to achieve the LMSW credential. An LMSW credential does not require post-graduate supervised work experience. An LMSW who does not continue on to an LCSW often practices what is often called macro social work which may include working in public policy, research, government agencies, or other advocacy that does not directly work with clients.
- **LPC.** **Licensed Professional Counselor** is a state license. To be eligible to take a state license exam, they must graduate from college, then graduate from a two-year master's program with a counseling focus (e.g., Master of Science in Clinical Mental Health Counseling, Master of Science in Addiction Counseling, or Master of Arts in Counseling), which typically includes includes one semester practicum (40 hours) and two semesters of internship (120 hours). After the masters degree, they spend approximately two years obtaining hands-on clinical experience under supervision. In Louisiana, the post-graduation requirement is 3,000 total hours including 1,900 direct client hours while supervised. They may go by other titles in some states (licensed clinical mental health counselors, licensed clinical professional counselors, or licensed mental health counselors). There are over 120,000 LPCs in the United States.
- **LPC-S.** **Licensed Professional Counselor – Supervisor** is an LPC who has passed certain requirements to be a supervisor of trainees working to become LPCs.
- **MD.** **Medical Doctor** is a degree from medical schools. Individuals must first obtain an undergraduate college degree before entering medical school. Medical school is four years of training in all of the medical specialties. The first two years are largely lecture and laboratory instruction. The second two years are almost entirely hands-on experience with patients in clinics and hospitals. After graduation from medical schools, doctors enter four-year residency training programs to become **psychiatrists**. Residency training to become a **child and adolescent psychiatrist** is five-to-six years.

- **MEd. Master of Education** is a university degree for those who want to work in education. After obtaining this master's degree, some choose to pursue the doctoral EdD degree. You may see some clinicians with this credential who are licensed to practice because their MEdD focused on counseling work within schools.
- **NCC. National Certified Counselor** is a designation provided by the National Board of Certified Counselors. To be eligible, clinicians must hold a masters degree in an area of counseling, obtain 3,000 of work experience after graduation within a 24-month period, and pass a standardized, national written examination. It is essentially a "board certification" for counselors. The NCC designation is not required by states to practice.
- **NP. Nurse Practitioner** is one of four subsets of Advanced Practice Registered Nurse (APRN) certification (the others work as midwives, anesthetists, or other specialists). There are approximately two dozen subspecialty certifications, one of which is Clinical Nurse Specialist in Child & Adolescent Psychiatric & Mental Health Nursing (PMHCNS-BC). Nurse practitioners in Louisiana are required to have a collaborative practice agreement (CPA) with a state-licensed physician or dentist. There are more than 290,000 NPs in the US but only about 2% (approximately 5,000) of those specialize in psychiatry.
- **PhD. Doctor of Philosophy** is the highest university degree and is awarded across many different academic fields. Individuals with a PhD in psychology who achieve state licensure are commonly known as **psychologists**. Individuals must first obtain an undergraduate college degree before entering graduate school. During graduate school, they earn a doctorate degree after five years of coursework and hands-on experience. Their training includes psychological theory, research, psychotherapy, and standardized testing of academic skills and personality. The final year of the doctoral program is an internship of working full-time with patients under supervision. After earning the PhD degree, individuals must then perform another year of supervised work experience as "postdocs" before they can apply for state licensure.
- **PLPC. Provisional Licensed Professional Counselor** indicates individuals who have achieved their master's degree and are seeing patients under supervision. They are in the process of earning their supervised work hours before they can take the state licensure test to become an LPC.
- **PsyD. Doctor of Psychology** has many overlaps with a PhD in psychology but has some differences. There are two training paths to become a psychologist. The most common is the PhD route. The PsyD alternative was introduced in the 1970s for students who were less interested in conducting research and more interested in providing direct patient care. The total duration of postgraduate training for a PsyD is one-to-two years shorter than a PhD because of the reduced focus on research. There are over 180 graduate schools for PhD psychology compared to over 120 graduate schools for PsyD.
- **RPT. Registered Play Therapist** is a designation provided by the Association for Play Therapy, which is a professional society. To be eligible, clinicians must hold a masters degree in a clinical mental health discipline and a state license to provide clinical mental health services. It requires a combination of instruction (150 hours of attendance at courses or conferences) and experience (350 hours of play therapy supervised by an RPT supervisor).

REFERENCES

Salsberg E, Quigley L, Mehfoud N, Acquaviva K, Wyche K, Sliwa S (October, 2017). Profile of the Social Work Workforce: A Report to Council on Social Work Education and National Workforce Initiative Steering Committee. The George Washington University Health Workforce Institute,

<https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Initiatives/National-Workforce-Initiative/SW-Workforce-Book-FINAL-11-08-2017.aspx> , accessed 4/22/20.

Table of the Most Common Credentials of Mental Health Professionals Recognized By or Provided by States for Licensing.

	LCSW	LPC	PhD	MD	NP
Full title	Licensed Clinical Social Worker	Licensed Professional Counselor	Doctor of Philosophy	Doctor of Medicine	Nurse Practitioner
Common Name	Social worker	LPC	psychologist	psychiatrist	nurse practitioner
What They Do	Psychotherapy	Psychotherapy	Psychological testing Psychotherapy	Prescribe medication Psychotherapy	Prescribe medication Psychotherapy
Years of School	4 years college 2 years masters	4 years college 2 years masters	4 years college 5 years doctorate	4 years college 4 years medical school	4 years college 2 years masters
Years of Supervised Training Post-School	2 years	2 years	1 year	4 years psychiatry residency; 5-6 years total if child and adolescent	400 or more hours, varies by state
How Many Are There	~160,000 ¹	~120,000	~106,000 ²	~41,000 general psychiatry; ~10,000 child and adol. psychiatry	~5,000

¹There are over 350,000 LCSWs but many work in other types of social agencies, hospital-based support services, or with primarily medically-ill patients. The number who work in direct patient care in mental health is difficult to estimate but is around 160,000.

²There are approximately 182,000 psychologists but only about 106,000 are licensed to practice. Many work in academia or industry and do not need state licenses.

Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) is another nursing specialty that can prescribe medications but there are some differences from NP.