

Psychiatrists and psychologists: what's the difference?

Many people get psychiatrists and psychologists confused with each other.

Both psychiatrists and psychologists understand how the brain works, our emotions, feelings and thoughts. Both can treat mental illness with psychological treatments (talking therapies).

However, psychiatrists attend medical school and become medical doctors before doing specialist training in mental health. Because they are doctors, psychiatrists understand the links between mental and physical problems. They can also prescribe medications.

The four main differences between psychiatrists and psychologists are:

- training
- treatments provided
- conditions treated
- getting an appointment.

Training

Psychiatrists are medical doctors with at least 11 years of training – usually more.

They first do a medical degree at university. Next they spend at least 1 or 2 years training as a general doctor.

They then complete at least 5 years training in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness.

Psychologists have at least 6 years of university training and supervised experience.

They may also hold a Masters or Doctorate level qualification in psychology. If they have a Doctorate (PhD) a psychologist can call themselves 'Dr', but they are not medical doctors.

Clinical psychologists have special training in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness.

Treatments provided

Psychiatrists can provide a wide range of treatments, according to the particular problem and what will work best. These include:

- medication
- general medical care, including checking your physical health and the effects of medication
- psychological treatments
- brain stimulation therapies such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).

Psychologists focus on providing psychological treatments.

Conditions treated

Psychiatrists tend to treat people who need their medical, psychological and social needs considered.

These are usually people with complex conditions, for example:

- severe depression
- schizophrenia
- bipolar disorder.

Someone who has attempted suicide or has suicidal thoughts will usually be seen by a psychiatrist.

Psychologists are more likely to see people with conditions that can be helped effectively with psychological treatments. This might include behavioural problems, learning difficulties, depression and anxiety.

Getting an appointment

As with all medical specialists, to see a **psychiatrist** you need a referral from your GP (family doctor).

To see a **psychologist** you don't need a referral. However, in Australia a GP can refer you to a psychologist as part of a Mental Health Treatment Plan.

There are around 4000 psychiatrists working across Australia and New Zealand, while there are about 27,000 registered psychologists.

Working together

Psychiatrists and psychologists often work together. A psychiatrist might make an initial assessment and diagnosis, then refer you to a psychologist for ongoing psychological treatment (talking therapy).

Psychiatrists and psychologists also work together in hospitals as part of mental health teams.

Who should I see?

If you are unsure whether you should see a psychiatrist or a psychologist, talk to your GP. They can give you advice about whether a psychiatrist or a psychologist is right for you.

It will depend on your unique situation and the type of treatment you need. Some people might see both.

- Mental illness: first steps to get help
yourhealthinmind.org/first
- Mental health workers: who's who?
yourhealthinmind.org/who
- Finding the right psychiatrist for you
yourhealthinmind.org/right

Remember

- ✓ Psychiatrists and psychologists are different.
- ✓ Psychiatrists are medical doctors who can provide a range of treatments, as well as plan your treatment as a whole.
- ✓ Your GP can help you decide whether a psychiatrist or a psychologist is right for you.

This fact sheet is also available online at yourhealthinmind.org

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About us

Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists:

- trains and supports psychiatrists
- advocates for better mental health for our communities
- sets standards in psychiatry.



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This is a general guide only, and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your situation. The RANZCP is not liable for any consequences arising from relying on this information. Subject matter experts, people with lived experience of mental illness and carers all contributed to this fact sheet.