

ASERT FAQ Sheet-Psychopharmacology Series

What is a Psychiatrist?



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There are many types of mental health professionals. The names of their professions and the differences among them, in training and services provided, can be confusing. This list of commonly asked questions will help you learn more about the experience and role of a psychiatrist.

What kind of education and training does a psychiatrist have?

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor (M.D.) or doctor of osteopathic medicine (D.O.) who has graduated from medical school and then has completed a psychiatry residency. A psychiatry residency involves at least four additional years beyond medical school of specialty training focused on the clinical practice of psychiatry. Psychiatrists who specialize in child and adolescent psychiatry often complete three years of a general psychiatry residency and then two additional years of a child and adolescent psychiatry fellowship.

How do you know whether a psychiatrist has received a level of training that is generally considered acceptable in the United States?

Ideally, they should have graduated from a medical school that is accredited by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), and completed a psychiatry residency program that is accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME). Psychiatrists who are board certified by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology have undergone a rigorous assessment of their skills. If a psychiatrist's education and training are not clearly displayed in the office or facility, it is acceptable to ask the provider for this information directly.

How does a psychiatrist's training differ from that of other mental health professionals?

A psychiatrist is the only mental health specialist with medical school training. Therefore, psychiatrists are trained in the use of medications for treatment as well as the impact of other medical conditions on mental health. They are also well-trained in the integration of medication with other types of treatments, and the assessment and treatment of brain-based behavioral disorders and medically complex cases. Other mental health professionals (e.g., psychologists, social workers, counsellors) receive distinct types of training, but not medically based. Mental health professionals hold degrees ranging from bachelor degrees up to doctoral degrees. The level of education impacts the level of expertise and type of services provided.

How does a psychiatrist differ from a nurse practitioner or physician's assistant?

There is a shortage of psychiatrists, which has led to an increase in the use of nurse practitioners and physician's assistants to treat psychiatric conditions. Nurse practitioner's have received their bachelor's degree in nursing followed by a master's degree and are required to sit for certification and licensing exams at the state and federal level. Nurse practitioner's typically collaborate with a physician and are allowed to diagnose and treat, including prescribe medication, independently. Physician's assistants have a bachelor's degree followed by the equivalent of a master's degree from specific physician assistant programs. They work under the supervision of a physician and also require national certification and state licensure. They may treat individuals directly, including prescribing medication, but all treatment decisions must be reviewed by a supervising physician.

Why do I need a psychiatrist?

Psychiatrists specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of disorders that affect brain and behaviors, including neurodevelopmental disorders (e.g., Autism Spectrum Disorders), schizophrenia or other psychotic disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, trauma and stress-related disorders, eating disorders, sleep-wake disorders, cognitive disorders, personality disorders, and substance abuse. The goal of psychiatry residency training is to provide all psychiatrists with a basic level of knowledge of all psychiatric disorders. However, like any medical professional, psychiatrists vary to some degree in their level of expertise and experience in treating particular disorders or in using particular treatment approaches. It is important to find a psychiatrist that has experience working with individuals who have autism as well as any co-occurring mental health conditions.

What can I expect when meeting with a psychiatrist? What kind of treatments can a psychiatrist provide?

Psychiatrists typically meet with patients once or twice initially to carry out a diagnostic interview, to determine what the main concerns are, and what types of further tests and/or treatments would be indicated. For treatment, psychiatrists can employ a variety of methods, including psychotherapy (“talk” treatment) and/or psychopharmacology (medication treatment). The goal is to relieve psychological symptoms and optimize patients functioning and well-being. An individual may meet with a psychiatrist monthly, bi-monthly, or as prescribed by the psychiatrist.

How can I find a qualified psychiatrist?

Your primary care doctor or therapist may refer you to a psychiatrist. You can also do your own research to find a psychiatrist or check on a psychiatrist’s background and qualifications. Most state licensure boards for physicians can provide the public with information about licensed physicians, their education, training, and other information. Organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association and the American Board of Medical Specialties (www.abms.org), which includes the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology (www.abpn.com), can provide information on the education, background, and experience of psychiatrists in your area.

This Frequently Asked Questions Sheet was developed by the Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training Collaborative (ASERT). For more information, please contact ASERT at 877-231-4244 or info@PAautism.org.