

What is the difference between a Counsellor, Social Worker, Psychologist, and a Psychiatrist? (Part 1 of 2)

Good question! Most people cannot distinguish between these disciplines. Regulatory bodies require each discipline to carefully represent themselves accurately.

First, let's distinguish Psychiatry from counsellors, Social Workers or Psychologists. A Psychiatrist is a medical physician who is a specialist in the treatments and medicines for the mind. This is the only discipline (of those referenced here) that can prescribe medication. A General Practitioner/Physician/Doctor must make a referral for you to see a Psychiatrist. Only a Psychiatrist/GP/Physician or other medical Physician can prescribe medications. Their training largely follows a medical treatment model. As such, Psychiatry appointments are generally shorter in length, as they listen for symptoms that would give them cause to prescribe or adjust a medication. Your Pharmacist may know more about the drug in question so you should consult with that discipline if your Psychiatrist prescribes a medication.

There are relatively few Psychiatrists in Canada who see patients for a full hour for what is basically called "talk therapy" (involving no medication). In other words, the Hollywood version of a Psychiatrist is a bit misleading.

Now to confuse matters further, a Registered Psychiatric Nurse (who would have 2-4 years of academic training) may also be involved. The nurse monitors the symptoms and medication, offers some general talk therapy and works in concert (as a team member) with the Psychiatrist in a public practice setting (hospital or outpatient clinic).

Wait times are generally several months, though most times your Physician may have already started some pharmaceutical intervention for the Psychiatrist to adjust.

This leaves the non-medical/Pharmacological disciplines of Psychology, Social Work and generic "Counsellor". In Saskatchewan, anyone can use the title of counsellor, therapist, mental health worker or a host of other labels. No training, licensing, or regulation is required. Occasionally you may see an allied degree (like a nurse or teacher) use the title of counsellor and represent a degree other than Social Work or Psychology. It is generally a good idea to look carefully into these services. The greatest issue (besides the obvious) is that they may not be accountable to any regulating body if you were to have a claim against them. In addition, the counsellor may not be insured at all, or their insurance may be very limited (and prohibitive). This is not to say they are not good at what they do. Some people with little to no training or allied training have a gift.

Part 2 of 2: What is the difference between a Counsellor, Social Worker, Psychologist, and a Psychiatrist?

In Part I, we distinguished Psychiatry – the medical model of the helping professions. In Part II, we will attempt to differentiate Psychologists, Social Workers, and Counsellors.

First, to be fully accurate, the research shows no difference in outcome for any of the disciplines or the model, philosophy or approach used by the practitioner. In other words, the Psychologist may be held in higher regard than a Social Worker or Counsellors but there is no research to support their greater effectiveness.

Admittedly, Psychologists are arguably held to a higher standard of care than the titles Social Worker and Counsellors. Using the title of Psychologist requires considerably more training and arduous comprehensive exams, plus an oral examination. The Social Work title can be used with a two-year diploma, an undergraduate or graduate degree. The title “Counsellor” is generic. As such, anyone can use the title with no training at all. A Canadian Certified Counsellor (CCC) status does require a minimum of a Masters Degree and the Association does have the right to certify, advise and discipline its members. So, a CCC may well have more training than a Registered Social Worker (RSW).

As with most disciplines, there are different types of Social Workers and Psychologists. A community Social Worker or an Administrative Social Worker would have no counselling training. Similarly, an Assessment Psychologist may have little counselling training.

So, indeed, it is buyer beware. First, ensure the person you are seeing is registered with any of these three bodies: Saskatchewan College of Psychologists, Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers or the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association. If not, you may be advised to continue looking for an accredited therapist. Second, check both the level of degree and the type of experience the therapist has before booking that initial appointment. A minimum of a Master’s Degree is recommended. Now, the question of the actual difference between the two disciplines is that Social Workers (like the name implies) have a broad social vision of the client. The Social Worker considers both the person and the environment to understand and treat the client. They cast a wider net to include family, family of origin, work, community and all variables in a person’s suffering. It is not that the Psychologist or Certified Counsellor neglects to consider these areas but it would be a matter of weighting. They may think that these external influences are factors but the weight of the responsibility rests largely/exclusively with the client. The Social Worker would regard the 5 factors worth 20% each in the foundations and functioning of the individual.

There can be considerable tension between the disciplines. The Psychiatrist who argues in the value of Pharmacology, the Psychologist who argues the value of individual responsibility, the Social Worker who argues the impact of an entire system, and the Certified Counsellor who may be more general.

The truth is, all four are correct and valuable depending on the case itself.