

# Riegler, Shienvold & Associates

## Mental Health Quick Notes

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### Navigating the Mental Health Field

**Q:** When I was having difficulty coping with the stress of helping to care for my aging father who has Alzheimer's disease, my neighbor referred me to a psychologist who had been helpful to her in the past. However, when I called for an appointment, I was told that the psychologist had moved out of the area and I was referred to a social worker for counseling. What is the difference between a psychologist and a social worker, and for that matter a psychiatrist?

**A:** Mental health professionals are all concerned with helping individuals (or families) who want assistance with issues related to their general well-being. This may include adjusting to situational stressors, dealing with vocational or educational problems, seeking enhanced personal performance and growth, or relieving and resolving more debilitating psychological, emotional, behavioral or social distress such as depression or panic attacks. Mental health professionals therefore are called upon to have expertise in a broad range of human functioning.

The stress you are experiencing may affect your emotional happiness, your social functioning (e. g. increased "grumpiness" with your spouse), your behavioral functioning (e. g. increased drinking), or biological functioning (e. g. difficulty sleeping or diminished appetite). You might benefit from receiving educational materials about the nature of Alzheimer's disease and strategies others have found helpful in confronting your problem. You might benefit from being able to talk to others who are or have been in a similar situation. You might benefit from individual counseling or psychotherapy that is focused on not only specific strategies for better coping with the demands of your father's care, but also an examination of your beliefs, attitudes and grief about

seeing your loved one deteriorate, no longer being the parent he was to you at one time, while you are powerless to do anything to stop this. You might benefit from a medically based intervention due to stress-related physical changes such as elevated blood pressure or tension headaches. These are all possibilities which would need to be assessed when you meet with a professional.

Mental health professionals need knowledge and expertise that cut across a number of different academic and professional domains. Professional training may occur in a variety of settings. Because mental health concerns may have biologically based origins and/or consequences, one place where mental health professionals are trained is medical schools. **Psychiatrists** are physicians who received the same kind of medical school training that your family doctor, cardiologist or gynecologist did. Upon completion of medical school, physicians typically select a residency training program in which they are trained in a specific specialty. Psychiatrists are physicians who receive additional training and skills in helping people to address problems or concerns about emotions, thinking or behavior. This training will include many of the same areas of learning that all mental health professionals receive as part of their training, including human relations and good counseling techniques. In addition, there is training in the biological bases of human experience and how medication may be used to improve that experience. When other mental health professionals are working with a person, it is common for a psychiatrist to be asked to consult about whether medication or some other medical intervention would be helpful

**Psychologists** have advanced graduate degrees and training in the behavioral sciences including the

use of established principles of learning, motivation, emotions, thinking and human development. They are trained to use this knowledge to evaluate and address concerns about personality, behavioral and emotional functioning and adjustment, social functioning and personal or academic performance.

In addition, psychologists have specialized skills in the use of standardized tests and measurement techniques known as psychological tests. These techniques provide a scientific basis for the evaluation of the abilities, motivations, aptitudes and other psychological attributes of people. It is not uncommon for a person to be working with a mental health professional and a psychologist is asked to do psychological testing to provide information to help the person and professional decide what the best course of action would be.

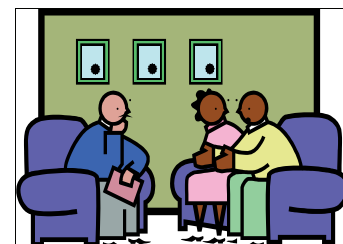
**Social workers** also have advanced graduate degrees and training. They are trained to use specialized knowledge of social resources, human capabilities and therapeutic techniques to help people achieve adequate and productive adjustment as individuals, and as members of families and communities. Their training teaches assessment and treatment of psychosocial disability and impairment, including mental and emotional disorders. Social work training often has a strong emphasis on ways to bring community services and interventions to bear in assisting people.

All three professions have considerable overlap in that their practitioners have expertise and experience in effective mental health assessment and intervention, including counseling and psychotherapy. In addition, each profession has a more specialized area of knowledge which may be applied to assist people. Psychiatrists are the only mental health professionals in Pennsylvania who can prescribe medications. Psychologists contribute specialized knowledge of science based evaluation techniques. Social workers are adept

in helping to find community resources. Fortunately, the training for all three professions emphasizes an awareness of the unique skills of the other professions and the importance of appropriate consultations when it would be helpful. So, for example, when you meet with your social worker to discuss your concerns regarding the impact of your father's illness on your life, there may be a discussion of whether it might be helpful to refer you for a psychiatric consultation to evaluate the advisability of medication to help you. Or it might be beneficial to discuss with your father's physicians whether he could benefit from a psychological evaluation to assess his current intellectual competencies and limitations as part of your learning how to contribute to his care.

In selecting mental health professionals to consult, it is important to ask if they are licensed to practice their profession (or else a trainee under the direct supervision of a licensed professional). In addition, it is very helpful to explain to them from the beginning what kind of problem you are seeking help for and to ask whether they have the training, background and experience to provide what you are looking for. If you decide it is not a good fit for you, it is always okay to seek a referral to a different professional.

Contributed by: Jeffrey Pincus, Ph.D.



**The measure of mental health is the disposition to find good everywhere.**

**- Ralph Waldo Emerson**

**Q:** I sometimes hear people talking about getting counseling or going to see their therapist. What is the difference between counseling and therapy?

**A:** Today, the terms “counseling” and “psychotherapy” or “therapy” often are used interchangeably. In practice, the things that counselors and therapists do are often nearly identical, and in many contexts, the distinction has faded away. It is worth noting, however, that while both counseling and psychotherapy in their modern forms began in the late nineteenth century, they have different origins and evolutions which lead to an important distinction in how the terms are sometimes used.

The term “counseling” is derived from a Latin root meaning “to deliberate (together).” Historically, counseling has been concerned with helping people adjust to difficult life situations or moving in positive directions in their lives. For example, if you are at a dead end in your career or are laid off and do not know what to do, you may consult a vocational counselor who would work with you to help you understand your aptitudes and preferences in order to help you develop a plan to improve your work life.

The term “psychotherapy” is derived from two Greek roots, which together mean “to nurse (or heal) the mind.” The historical perspective of a therapist was analogous to that of a medical healer. There was an assumption that something was deficient, abnormal or pathological and in need of a cure. In the above example, individuals in a frustrating career situation might be experiencing depression due to concerns about their own adequacy and anxiety about finances and the need to keep their family going. The traditional therapist would have focused on addressing the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

In the real world, of course, this is a false dichotomy. Most people with career stress are also experiencing personal, emotional and interpersonal distress. People experiencing distress because of career issues may benefit from interventions both to improve their vocational satisfaction and to reduce their level of distress. Over the years, counselors developed ways to address the personal distress or dysfunction that occurs to people who are going through transi-

tional or stressful times in their lives. At the same time, many therapists have accepted that helping people to change stressful situations or environments can relieve the “symptoms” that brought them to therapy. Traditional counselors and therapists have learned from each other and now share many techniques and goals in common.

Why, then, is the distinction between counseling and psychotherapy still important? As a practical matter, many people have **health** insurance which will only pay for the **treatment of medically necessary mental health disorders**. This means that for people seeking service of a mental health professional to receive insurance benefits, they must have problems or symptoms which fit within a medically defined classification system of disorders. Your insurance benefit may apply if you are receiving therapy for depression and anxiety but not if you are receiving counseling to enhance your career satisfaction. As we have seen, many times this is not a problem because there is considerable overlap between the two approaches and the traditional counseling and therapy perspectives are not mutually exclusive.

However, there are some services that counselors or therapists might provide to people which can be of great help in improving their lives but which are not based on the existence of a mental disorder or illness. This often leads to decisions that may seem arbitrary or odd. For example, if you and your spouse are planning to divorce, you may wisely seek counseling on how to work with your child to best handle the emotional impact and to prevent the child from going downhill. Both counselors and therapists have the skills to help you with this. Because there is no diagnosable mental health disorder at this point, however, your health insurance may not help pay for these services. If, on the other hand, your child were experiencing significant anxiety in anticipation of the divorce, or in response to the discord between the parents, the insurer might pay for the same professional services which would then be labeled “family psychotherapy” to treat an “adjustment disorder” or an “anxiety disorder.”

Most health insurers operate from a medically based perspective, which allows for treatment of existing problems but not for enhancing the functioning of individuals where no diagnosable

problem currently exists. For them, the traditional, if somewhat outdated distinction between counseling and psychotherapy is still important. You may think of this as analogous to a medical insurance decision that would pay for surgery to repair damage to your nose that was sustained while playing softball but would not pay for the same surgery done on an uninjured nose for solely cosmetic purposes. If you wish to access your health insurance benefits when seeking the services of mental health professionals, it is important to discuss with them whether you have a diagnosable disorder for which they can honestly report they are doing therapy.

Contributed by: Jeffrey Pincus, Ph.D.

### Staff of the Month



**Jeffrey Pincus, Ph.D.**

Dr. Pincus is a psychologist with over 25 years of experience in providing clinical psychological services to individuals, couples, families and groups. His experience is in working with depression, anxiety disorders, sexual problems, relationship issues and addictions.

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