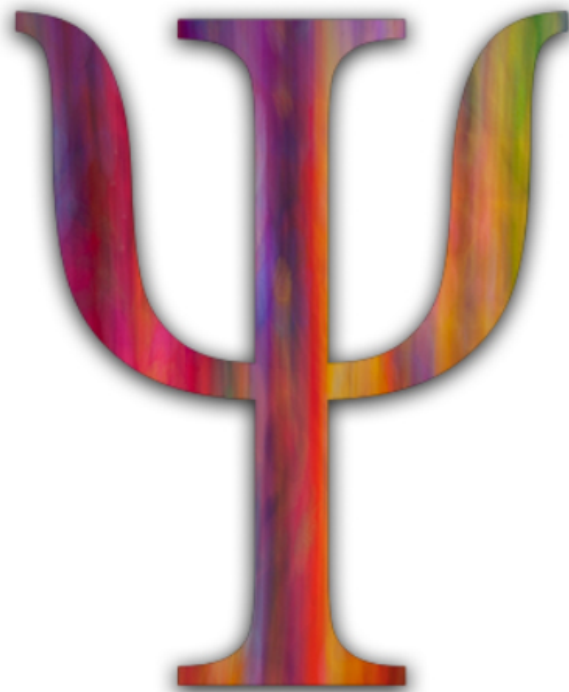


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# Graduate School and Careers in Applied Mental Health Psychology

John Suler, PhD



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# Graduate School and Careers in Applied Mental Health Psychology

The different areas of graduate study  
The APA book *Graduate Study in Psychology*

## **A checklist to consider**

- ✓ GPA
- ✓ GREs
- ✓ Letters of recommendation
- ✓ Research with our faculty
- ✓ Your personal statement
- ✓ Field work and other practical experiences
- ✓ Required courses
- ✓ Casting a wide net
- ✓ Going for a visit and interviewing
- ✓ Applying now or applying later
- ✓ Money

## **A recommended timetable**

### **Careers in counseling and psychotherapy**

Masters programs  
Clinical Psychology (PhD)  
Clinical Psychology (PsyD)  
Counseling Psychology (EdD or PhD)  
Professional Counselors (LPC)  
Clinical Social Work (MSW)  
School Psychology  
APA approval  
Psychiatry (MD)

Working in business and industry (I.O. Psychology)  
Working with a bachelors degree  
Licensing to practice psychology ("private practice")  
What courses to take

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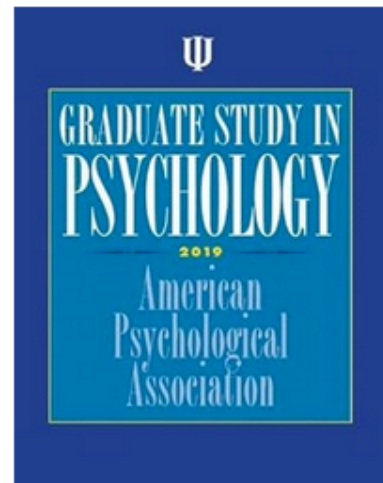
Getting into a graduate program in psychology can be rather complex and confusing. There are many different paths you can take and a variety of challenges along the way. But don't panic. Take it one step at a time. Read over this handout a few times. Write down any questions you might have and bring those questions to your faculty advisor.

## **The Different Areas of Graduate Study**

Graduate programs in psychology include experimental, developmental, social, neuropsychology, cognitive, clinical, counseling, school, and organizational psychology (also known as industrial-organizational psychology, or simply "IO"). These last four (clinical, counseling, school, and IO) are considered by the American Psychological Association (APA) to be the four distinct areas of "applied" psychology.

Other more specialized graduate programs are devoted to such disciplines as sports psychology, psychology and law, or behavioral medicine. Large psychology departments at large universities include many of the most common programs, but most universities will only have a few of them.

A good source of information about these various programs is the book *Graduate Study in Psychology* published by the APA. It lists, by state, most of the graduate psychology programs in this country. It includes information about admission criteria, how many students are accepted each year, number of faculty members, and where to get more information and an application. Your university library should have a copy of it as well as other books about graduate school. You also can order it from Amazon and the website of the American Psychological Association. Once you use this book to identify the programs that you like, visit their websites to get more detailed information.



Generally speaking, getting into graduate school is a game of chance. Many programs are very competitive. There's no guarantee that you will get into the exact program at the exact university that you want. But there are some things you can do to optimize that possibility...

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## A Checklist to Consider

### GPA

Grade point average is an index many graduate schools take seriously. The higher your GPA the better your chances of getting in. Competitive programs may look for GPAs at 3.5 or higher.

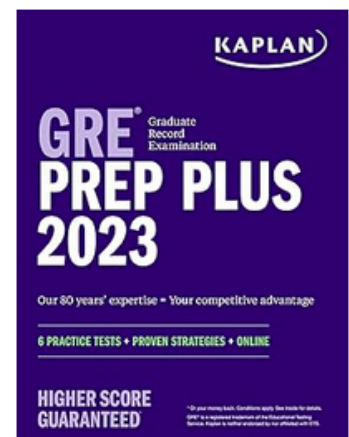
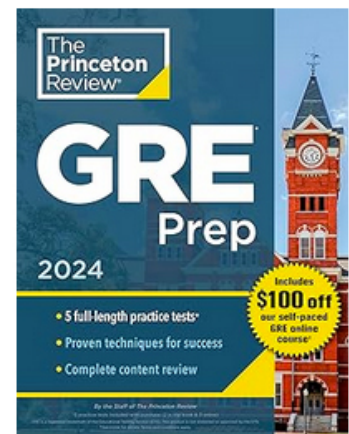
### GREs

Although graduate programs don't consider the GREs as critical as they did in the past, many programs will require you to take them. The test is similar to the SATs. Some schools will also require you to take the subject-matter portion of the test, which for you would be in psychology (it consists of multiple choice questions pertaining to all the different fields within psychology).

Some programs use a cut off. If you don't get above a certain score, they may not even look at your application. *Graduate Study in Psychology* lists the average GRE scores for students who are accepted into a program. A few less competitive graduate schools may not have a cut off score or may not require you to take the GREs at all.

It's unwise to take the GREs cold. Prepare for it. Manuals, such as those by Princeton Review and Kaplan describe strategies for the test and provide sample exams. For the advanced test in psychology, get a good intro psych textbook and memorize as you can. Perhaps serve as a tutor for students in intro psych courses. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) website has more information about the GREs.

Some schools may require you to take additional standardized tests such as the Miller Analogies Test. There are books that can help you prepare for these exams.



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## **Letters of Recommendation**

Many graduate schools weigh letters highly. Strong ones can compensate for GPAs and GREs that are weak. Strong letters can be your greatest asset. Receiving one from a professor with whom you took some courses is OK, but get to know professors outside the classroom. Develop a high profile in the department by becoming active in it. Get involved in clubs. Volunteer to help with department activities. The better the faculty know you, the more likely they can write a convincing letter. When you ask a professor for a recommendation give them some written information about yourself, the courses you took with them, your grades, any activities you undertook in the department or on campus, your career plans, etc. Here's a way you can work towards getting a truly excellent letter of recommendation...

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## **Research with faculty**

Find a professor in your department who is doing research that interests you. Volunteer your time to work with the professor, ask about work study, or become a dedicated research assistant. When they write their letter of recommendation, professors can speak from their personal experience of working with you.

Many psychology departments offer independent studies. This is a project in which you work one on one with a faculty on a topic of mutual interest. When professors get to know you in this capacity, they can write a strong letter about your understanding of psychology and your work habits. Successfully completing these projects also demonstrates to graduate schools that you are a motivated person who can work independently and as part of a team.

Undergraduate students sometimes present papers at conferences or publish articles with the faculty based on such projects. This will impress graduate programs because not many undergraduates can claim these accomplishments. Programs that emphasize research might be especially impressed by your being actively involved in it, especially if the research led to a conference presentation or a publication. Programs that emphasize training in counseling rather than research might also be impressed by projects involving case studies, literature reviews, observational studies, and experiential learning.

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## **Your personal statement**

Most programs will ask you to submit a personal statement in which you describe yourself and your reasons for going to graduate school. Spend some time on it and prepare a carefully thought-out letter. Really try to convey who you are as a person, rather than just simply describing your background. Avoid platitudes like "I'm really interested in psychology" or, for a counseling program, "I want to help people." Would you be applying for the program if you didn't feel that way? Graduate programs hear this sort of thing all the time. It won't make you stand out.

If you really want to do it right, tailor your letter for each program you apply to. Say something about your background, your accomplishments, what exactly about psychology interests you, what you plan to do in the future – *but also state exactly why it is you're applying to that particular program*. What is it specifically that attracts you? How will it benefit you and what do you have to offer it? Be specific. If you are interested in one or more of their faculty member's work, say so. If you are interested in a particular aspect of the program, say so. And explain why.

Keep your letter short, two or three pages. Experiment with being creative. Ask friends, family, and professors for feedback on it.

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## **Field work and other practical experiences**

Some graduate programs might be impressed by your having some substantial practical experience in a setting related to their program. For example, experimental programs may find it appealing that a student helped out with a professor's research project. A developmental program may be impressed by someone who worked with developmentally handicapped children. Clinical and counseling psychology may think it is important that a student worked in a mental health setting.

Many psychology departments offer field work courses where you can get such practical experience. You also can volunteer on your own or look for part time/summer jobs. There is no guarantee that a graduate program will value this experience. Those programs that emphasize research training (including clinical psychology programs) might be more concerned about your academic achievements than your practical experiences.

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## **Required courses**

Many programs will require your taking undergraduate courses in psychology and a certain amount of credits in psychology. Courses such as statistics and experimental psychology often are required. *Graduate Study in Psychology* lists the requirements for each graduate program.

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## **Casting a wide net**

To maximize the possibility of getting in, apply to as many schools as you can, maybe ten or more. Apply to a few really outstanding programs: who knows, you may get lucky! Also apply to a few programs that are less competitive, so you'll be guaranteed of receiving at least one or two offers. And don't be too upset if you do get rejected, because the odds are that some programs will not accept you.

If you're willing to go to another part of the country, you will have a wider selection of schools to apply to, and a better chance of being accepted. There are very good programs in parts of the country that people perceive to be less desirable areas to live.

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## **Going for a visit and interviewing**

If possible, visit the school even before you know whether or not you are accepted. Talk to the faculty and students. It might help you decide whether or not you want to be there. It also might help you make an impression on them. Making a personal contact can be very effective (even on the phone) as long as you are not pressuring people or being a pest in some way.

Definitely try to visit the programs that accept you. Talk to the faculty, find out everything you can about the program. Do they feel like people you could work with? Are they friendly, helpful, cold, obnoxious? Make a point of talking to beginning and advanced students. They will tell you things that the faculty might not.

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## **Applying now or later**

Many students think they should apply to graduate school immediately after they finish their undergraduate work. If you are the type of person who will lose steam (i.e., motivation) after taking a year or two off, then maybe you should apply right away. But it's not critical that you apply immediately. If you take a year or two off to work, in order to make money for graduate school or to get some experience in psychology, that might look good in the eyes of the graduate program. They like motivated, determined people. But if you drift from job to job, or if you aren't working at all and just seem to be ambling about with no rhyme or reason, that might look bad.

Older students who have been working a number of years or raising a family sometimes think they are in a one-down position. Again, this is not necessarily true. If there is evidence that you are a conscientious and motivated person, then those are points in your favor. Some counseling and clinical psychology programs might even prefer older students. They believe they are more mature, responsible people. Many counseling psychology programs are specifically designed for people who are working full time and/or have families.

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## **Money**

Education costs money. Graduate school is no exception. Some programs will offer you some financial support. Some programs, usually those at state universities, might support students for the first few years in the form of "stipends." Others might offer a Research Assistantship in which you help a professor conduct his or her research in return for pay. For a Teaching Assistantship you would help a professor teach a course, or perhaps teach a section yourself, in return for pay. You might not get as much money as you want, but as Jagger might say, you'll get what you need (just enough to live on). Also, some universities might waive tuition if you are working for them in some capacity. Find out about stipends, teaching and research assistantships, and tuition remission before you decide to go to a program.



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## **A Recommended Timetable**

If you intend to go to graduate school right after you finish your undergraduate work, here's a timetable for preparing your applications:

### **Spring semester of your junior year:**

- think about what type of program you're interested in
- start talking to the faculty
- if you haven't already done so, find out if you can get involved in faculty research or an independent study project; consider taking a fieldwork course

### **Summer before your senior year:**

- look over *Graduate Study in Psychology*
- make a rough list of schools you might apply to
- start to narrow down that list by visiting the school websites
- start writing your personal statement
- begin studying for the GREs

### **Fall semester of your senior year:**

- near the start of the semester, contact the schools for information and applications; visit their websites
- as you receive this information, start making your final list of schools you will apply to
- continue studying for the GREs
- take the GREs
- visit the schools you are really interested in

### **Near the end of the fall semester:**

- towards the end of the semester, ask professors to write letters of recommendation
- complete your applications and send them off
- deadlines may be in January, February, or March

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## Careers in Counseling and Psychotherapy

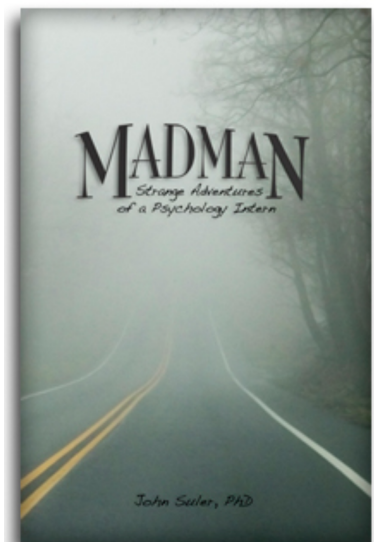
If you're interested in clinical or counseling psychology, you first should ask yourself a few questions. For how many years am I willing to go to graduate school? Do I want to work in a hospital, clinic, or program somewhere? Do I want to have a private practice or work in a group practice? Is there any particular type of client or mental health problem I would like to work with? Am I interested in doing research?

It's not easy answering these questions now, but forming a clear vision of what you would like to be doing someday will help you make decisions about graduate school.

The mental health field is complex. There are several types of professionals with different types of training. There are many different paths you can take to get to a career in which you "counsel" people. What follows is a description of the various doctorate and masters level programs.

You do not necessarily have to get a PhD in order to be a counselor or psychotherapist. Keep in mind that there are national organizations that provide the training regulations for the different types of mental health professionals (like the APA for psychologists), but that individual states control the licensing of the mental health professionals working in that state.

For a depiction of what it's like to be a psychology intern working in a modern psychiatric hospital, you might want to read John Suler's novel *Madman: Strange Adventures of a Psychology Intern*.



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## **Masters Programs** (may be full or part time)

There are a variety of masters levels programs in fields related to clinical and counseling psychology. Usually these programs train people in basic counseling skills. Some programs may have specialized areas of training such as marriage and family counseling, drug addiction counseling, group counseling, vocational counseling, family therapy, child therapy, divorce mediation, prison counseling, etc. When it comes time to apply for jobs, it's very advantageous to have an area of specialization.

People with masters degrees usually work in group counseling practices, clinics, program for specific populations (drug abusers, battered wives, chronic psychiatric patients, etc.), and employee assistance programs. In some states people with masters degrees cannot a private practice.

A PhD may enable you to make more money and may open up different doors for you, but it is not absolutely necessary to have one. In many cases a masters degree might be ideal. Given the current proliferation of managed care systems in the field of mental health, insurance companies might only pay for psychotherapy provided by clinicians who are part of a group practice. While clinicians with advanced degrees may be in charge of the group, they might very well hire clinicians with masters degrees to do therapy and counseling of their clients. Indeed, there is a demand for psychotherapists with masters degrees.

If you are determined to get a PhD, you can sometimes get a masters degree from one school and then transfer to a PhD program at another school. But you might lose credits. While some PhD programs prefer to train students right from the start, others are designed for people coming from masters programs.

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## **PhD Clinical Psychology** (5 years minimum)

These programs educate students about mental health and mental health treatment. Many programs emphasize research and require you to take courses in statistics and experimental design. You will be expected to conduct research, which will culminate in your dissertation. A dissertation is a year-long (or longer) research project that you design and conduct on your own, with help from a committee of faculty members.

Most programs are behavioral, cognitive, neuropsychological, or psychoanalytic in their approach. Some programs mix all of the above. A few are humanistic\existential. During the first few years in a clinical program you will get some training in psychotherapy and psychological testing, but the most intense clinical training usually comes later during an internship. A few PhD clinical psychology programs underplay the research component and spend more time on training you to do psychotherapy. But most programs weigh heavily on the research.

All clinical programs require you to do an **internship**, usually in your fifth or sixth year. During that year you work full time in a hospital, clinic, or mental health center. The internship usually is separate from your graduate program. It may be in a different part of the country. Usually it is up to you to apply for an internship. Yes, it's another application and interviewing process all over again.

Clinical psychologists usually end up teaching at universities, working in hospitals and clinics, or in private and group practices.

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### **PsyD Clinical Psychology (4-5 years full time)**

These programs lead to the degree "Doctor of Psychology" rather than the traditional PhD ("Doctor of Philosophy"). They were created as an alternative to PhD clinical psychology programs. They are designed for people who specifically want to practice psychology and are not interested in a career involving quantitative research. There is some research training, but much more time is spent on learning the various aspects of clinical work (individual and group psychotherapy, testing, marriage and family counseling, etc.). Usually more internship experiences in a wider variety of settings are required than in PhD programs. PsyD clinical psychologists usually work in hospitals, clinics, and private or group practices.

PsyD programs tend to have more students per class than PhD programs, as many as 30 or 40 compared to 5 or 10 in the PhD programs. The PsyD degree tends to be perceived as less prestigious than the PhD, although this perception is based more on bias than fact. California has an extensive PsyD system. PsyD and especially PhD programs in clinical psychology often are the most difficult ones to get into.

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### **Counseling Psychology (EdD or PhD, 4 -5 years full time)**

Counseling psychology emphasizes training in counseling/psychotherapy methods. These programs include some training in research methods but usually are not as rigorous as clinical psychology programs. However, counseling programs that offer a PhD rather than the traditional EdD often intensify their research training. Similar to clinical psychology programs, counseling programs require internship experiences and a dissertation. In many respects, the distinction between counseling and clinical psychology programs is disappearing. A counseling program often is completely separate from the psychology department at a university. Some counseling programs are part-time which is an attractive option to people who are working, and/or have families.

Counseling psychologists tend to work in group counseling practices, private practice, and programs for special populations (mental retardation, drug addicted, prison settings, battered wives, etc.). Some counseling psychologists teach at universities, usually in graduate counseling programs, or at the undergraduate level or in psychology.

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### **Professional Counselors (L.P.C., usually 2-4 years)**

Programs for licensed professional counselors and licensed mental health counselors resemble counseling psychology. Professional counselors are not psychologists. It is considered a different field than psychology even though they overlap. LPCs have careers similar to counseling psychologists.

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### **Clinical Social Work (MSW, 2-3 years full time)**

Clinical social work programs teach students about working in the mental health and social welfare systems. Training in counseling and psychotherapy sometimes is not as extensive as in psychology programs, especially PsyD programs. Research usually is not emphasized. Many clinical social workers do individual and group psychotherapy. Social work programs may be easy or difficult to get into depending on the reputation of the university. Clinical social workers work in hospitals, clinics, specialized programs, and private practice.

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## **School Psychology** (4-5 years for PhD or EdD, 2-3 years for masters)

School psychologists are training to do counseling and psychological testing in a school setting. Their strength, therefore, is their understanding of school systems and education. They may work with the children in the school or the staff. Some school psychologists also have a private practice. Some school psychology programs offer the EdD. Others, which may place more emphasis on research training, offer the PhD.

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## **APA Approval**

Some counseling, school, and clinical psychology programs (PhD or PsyD) have been approved by the APA. This means that the program meets the APA guidelines for "good" training. The APA book *Graduate Study in Psychology* will tell you if a program is approved or not. It is more difficult to get into these programs. Graduating from them may open more doors for you later on.

If a program is not approved, it could mean several things. The program may have lost its approval or is unable to attain it, which is a bad sign. Or the program may be in the process of applying for approval, which might be a good sign if it's an up and coming program. Or the program may not care about applying for APA approval. Some excellent training facilities aren't concerned about APA approval.

Internships in clinical and counseling psychology also will be APA approved or not. Usually APA approved internships prefer students from APA approved graduate programs. Jobs in the mental health field sometimes require that a person had an APA approved internship.

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## **Psychiatry** (MD, includes Med School, internship, and residency)

After completing medical school, a student can specialize in psychiatry during his/her residency. Training is usually biological in its approach (e.g., drug treatment) although some programs endorse psychodynamic or behavioral therapy. Compared to PhD psychology programs, there is less training in research and psychological testing.

Psychiatrists tend to work in hospitals, clinics, and private practice. They usually work with more severely disturbed patients (e.g., schizophrenia, mood disorders) although many psychiatrists prefer working with other types of patients. In hospital settings, psychiatrists tend to be perceived as the most prestigious of the mental health professionals.

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### **Working in Business and Industry (I/O Psychology)**

Some psychologists work in the business world doing psychological assessments, testing, interpersonal mediation, group dynamic assessments, and workshops (on stress, depression, communication skills, etc.). These psychologists may be employed by a specific company or may offer their services free-lance. Many of these psychologists graduate from clinical and counseling psychological programs. Others have masters degrees. Some graduate programs specialize in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, although there are not many of them.

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### **Working with a Masters Degree**

People do work in the mental health field with a bachelors degree. Usually they work in specialized programs – e.g., programs for chronic psychiatric patients, prison settings, drug addictions, etc. This is often difficult work and does not pay very well. People often use such jobs to get experience and as stepping stones to other jobs. People with a B.A. in psychology often get a variety of different kinds of jobs related to human services.

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### **Licensing to Practice Psychology (private practice)**

In order to practice psychology (and have your own practice) you must be licensed by the state. Most states require approximately two years of supervised experience after you get your PhD, PsyD, or EdD. You must also pass a national multiple-choice exam and, in many states, present a case study to a board of psychologists. You cannot advertise yourself as a "psychologist" or say that you offer "psychological" services unless you are licensed. These terms are protected by law. In fact, all of the professional terms listed above are protected by law. Being licensed also enables you to receive payment from your clients' insurance companies.

The APA recognizes four specialties in applied psychology: clinical, counseling, school, and industrial/organizational. All professionals, regardless of their specialty, take a state licensing exam. If they pass the exam, all carry the same legal title in the eyes of the state: "Psychologist." The other types of psychotherapists are permitted to have private practices as long as they have been licensed by the state. In some states people with masters degrees are not permitted to have their own private practice.

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### **What Courses to Take**

What undergraduate courses should you take if you are interested in someday becoming a counselor or psychotherapist? Courses that constitute a psychology major are essential - especially those pertaining to abnormal, social, and developmental psychology. But, in a way there is NO course that is irrelevant! As a therapist you will be working with people from all walks of life. It is very helpful to know something about their particular work, interests, and lifestyle. If you are working with an accountant, it helps to know something about accounting. If you are working someone who is Irish, it helps to know something about Irish history and culture. A good psychotherapist is someone who is well rounded in his or her knowledge! People are psychological, biological, historical beings, so courses in literature, philosophy, history, sociology, communications, art, biology, chemistry may all be relevant. Think about what you want to be doing in your career, and choose courses that fulfill and round out those interests.

*Whatever path you pursue in your career, take pride in knowing that you are participating in a noble endeavor: helping your fellow human beings. Good luck!*



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