

PSYCHOLOGISTS – Who, What, When, Where and Why?

WHAT IS A PSYCHOLOGIST?

Psychology is the scientific study of human behaviour, including the behaviours of thinking and feeling. A practicing psychologist is trained to assess and diagnose problems in thinking, feeling, and behaving and help people overcome or manage these problems.

In New Brunswick, a psychologist is a professional who has:

- 1) received an advanced university degree (master's or doctorate) in psychology
- 2) supervised experience in psychology
- 3) successfully passed written and oral examinations demonstrating their readiness to practice psychology independently and,
- 4) been granted a license by the College of Psychologists of New Brunswick

Only those individuals who have been granted a license by the College can legally use the title “Psychologist” and engage in the professional practice of psychology in the province of New Brunswick.

WHERE DO PSYCHOLOGISTS WORK?

Some psychologists work primarily as researchers and faculty at universities and at governmental and non-governmental organizations. Others work primarily as practitioners in hospitals, schools, clinics, correctional facilities, employee assistance programs and private offices. Many psychologists are active in both research and practice.

WHAT DO PSYCHOLOGISTS DO?

Psychologists engage in research, practice and teaching across a wide range of topics having to do with how people think, feel and behave. Their work can involve individuals, groups, families as well as larger organizations in government and industry. Some areas of research and practice are:

- mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, phobias, etc.
- neurological, genetic, psychological and social determinants of behaviour
- brain injury and degenerative brain diseases
- the perception and management of pain
- psychological factors and problems associated with physical conditions and disease (e.g. diabetes, heart disease, stroke)
- psychological factors and management of terminal illnesses such as cancer
- cognitive functions such as learning, memory, problem solving, intellectual ability and performance
- developmental and behavioural abilities and problems across the lifespan

- criminal behaviour, crime prevention, services for victims and perpetrators of criminal activity
- addictions and substance use and abuse (e.g. smoking, alcohol, drugs)
- stress, anger and other aspects of lifestyle management, court consultations addressing the impact and role of psychological and cognitive factors in accidents and injury, parental capacity, and competence to manage one's personal affairs
- the application of psychological factors and issues to work such as motivation, leadership, productivity, marketing, healthy workplaces, ergonomics
- marital and family relationships and problems
- psychological factors necessary to maintaining wellness and preventing disease
- social and cultural behaviour and attitudes, the relationship between the individual and the many groups of which he or she is part (e.g. work, family, society)
- the role and impact of psychological factors on performance at work, recreation and sport

WHEN TO CONSULT A PSYCHOLOGIST?

Individuals or organizations may call upon a psychologist for a variety of reasons. These include gaining a better understanding of their own behaviour or the behaviour of others, learning how to solve problems or learning how to function more effectively in various situations.

Most people experience personal problems from time to time and many may need some assistance in dealing with them. These problems may occur at home, school, work or in other situations. Early psychological intervention may prevent the development of more serious problems. Some common problems for which people consult psychologists include:

EMOTIONAL: unexplained fears, anxieties, phobias, depression, lack of self-confidence, etc.

SOCIAL: conflicts with others, severe shyness, loneliness, difficulty in making friends, aggressive behaviour, etc.

FAMILY: marital problems, abuse, child management problems, sexual problems, etc.

SCHOOL: learning difficulties, academic underachievement, developmental delays, behaviour problems in the classroom, school phobias, etc.
WORK: absenteeism, personnel evaluation, occupational stress, problems addressed by employee assistance programs, burn out, etc.

HEALTH AND REHABILITATION: stress-related illnesses, adjustment to chronic illness or disability, insomnia, pain management, weight control problems, etc.

WHY SEE A REGULATED PROFESSIONAL?

Regulation or licensure is mandated through the government and is important because it ensures that the psychologist has met a high standard of training and is providing a high standard of care.

WHAT DOES IT COST?

Psychological services provided through government or publicly funded institutions such as hospitals, schools, and mental health clinics are usually rendered free of direct charge to the consumer.

The services of psychologists engaged in full or part-time private practice are not covered by Medicare, and psychologists, like other professionals, charge a fee for services rendered. For those seeking the services of a private practitioner in psychology, it may be useful to know that most private health care insurance programs provide coverage which includes psychological services.

The College of Psychologists of New Brunswick does not prescribe the fees psychologists may charge their clients. It does however provide some guidelines to its members.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PSYCHOLOGIST, A PSYCHIATRIST AND A PSYCHOTHERAPIST?

In Canada, the professionals who most commonly treat people with mental health problems are psychologists and psychiatrists. The difference between the two is not always obvious, even for the people they treat. In fact, when meeting new clients, clinical psychologists are often asked: "What is the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist?"

Psychiatrists are medical doctors, who go on to specialize in mental health and mental disorders. As medical doctors, they can prescribe medication to their patients to treat their mental disorders. Some psychiatrists also offer psychotherapy, much like clinical psychologists do. Clinical psychologists do not prescribe medication, but they are fully trained to assess, diagnose and treat mental disorders using scientifically-based psychological techniques. Scientifically-based means that various techniques have been compared using sound scientific methods and the results of such studies are published in peer-reviewed, scientific journals. This is also referred to as evidence based practice.

Individuals with certain disorders may require medication but may also require psychological interventions to help them acquire skills to better cope with their life. Often, in hospitals and other clinical settings, psychiatrists and clinical psychologists will work together on interdisciplinary teams. The combined medical/psychiatric and psychological treatment is the best intervention for many patients. More information on psychiatry is available on the Canadian Psychiatric Association's website at <http://www.cpa-apc.org>.

The term “psychotherapist” is a general one referring to someone who offers psychotherapeutic counselling. Practitioners may have training in: psychology, psychiatry, social work, marriage and family counselling, psychiatric nursing, etc. In New Brunswick, there are no laws preventing anyone from using this title, whether they have proper training or not.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE PERSONAL INFORMATION I DISCUSS WITH MY PSYCHOLOGIST?

In consulting a practitioner about personal psychological problems, people are often concerned about confidentiality. Early on, when seeing a client, the psychologist should review the limits of confidentiality. Information disclosed to a psychologist is confidential and, except under certain specific conditions, cannot be disclosed without the client's consent. These conditions are referred to as the “limits of confidentiality.” These limits typically involve situations where the client gives the psychologist information that leads him or her to suspect that imminent harm might come to someone.

If a psychologist suspects an imminent risk that a client is going to harm himself or someone else, that a child is being abused or neglected, or that another health care practitioner has sexually abused a patient in some way, then he or she has an obligation to report this information to the appropriate authority (the police or children's aid society for example). The courts also have the power to subpoena a psychologist's files.

Psychologists must retain records of their contacts with clients and these records typically include details about the client's presenting problem and history, psychological test data and any diagnoses made, as well as details about sessions attended. Typically, records are kept for 7 to 10 years after the last client contact and for at least 10 years after a minor client reach the age of majority. After the 10 years are up, files can be destroyed.

WHAT HAPPENS ON MY FIRST VISIT TO A PSYCHOLOGIST

Once you have the name of a practitioner and make a first appointment, it is usual for him or her to ask you to describe your problem and to ask for details about your personal history. These questions will include such things as when did your problem start, what makes it better or worse, how does the problem affect your work or social life. Questions about your personal history can include details about your experiences

growing up, your education and work history, your marital status and interpersonal relationships, and whether you use medication, alcohol or drugs. This information gathering phase can take one or more sessions and may be supplemented by the use of psychological tests.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTS

Psychological tests are used to gain a better understanding of the kind of problem in thinking, feeling or behaviour with which a person presents. If a psychologist plans to use a test, he or she should explain why it is being used and what mental process is being assessed. For example, some tests are used to assess and help diagnose mood, some are used to assess problems in memory or concentration, and some might be used to better understand personality characteristics. Some are pencil and paper tests that pose questions to which you must answer 'true' or 'false' and others might require you to manipulate objects or remember numbers or phrases. Testing is used to help the psychologist arrive at an impression or diagnosis of your particular problem.

TREATMENT

Following the information-gathering phase, which may or may not include psychological testing, it is important that the psychologist discuss with the client (and/or his or her parent or guardian, if the client is a child) what he or she thinks is wrong and what he can offer in the way of help. Reasonable questions to ask a psychologist are:

- Are you comfortable treating people with this kind of problem?
- What kind of psychotherapeutic approach do you use and how does it work?
- What kind of outcome can I expect?

Treatments or psychotherapeutic approaches used by psychologists should be empirically-supported treatments – in other words treatments which research has proven to be effective. Common types of treatments include cognitive-behavioural therapy, emotion focused therapy, interpersonal therapy, and systems therapy among others. A treatment plan may be offered based on one approach or it may incorporate more than one approach. Treatment might be offered in an individual, group, couple or family format depending on the problem and whom it affects.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING PSYCHOLOGICAL TREATMENT?

Early on in the treatment, the psychologist will help you make goals to work toward and identify the ways therapy will help you achieve them. Goals might include such things as feeling less depressed, feeling more comfortable in social situations, improving pain management, changing your behaviour, or increasing self-esteem. In addition, the psychologist will review your progress in meeting these goals at certain intervals and may have you fill out questionnaires designed to help monitor progress.

An important thing to remember about psychological treatment is that it can be hard work to change feelings, thoughts and behaviours – you have to be ready to commit to attending sessions regularly and following through on recommendations. One thing that cannot be changed is the past but you can change how it affects you. It is also difficult to change the behaviour of other people. Psychological treatment is primarily focused on helping you make personal changes to improve your life.

There is often more than one way to solve or manage a psychological problem – the method chosen can depend on the training of the practitioner and the characteristics of the client. Finally, you are entitled to be an informed consumer and active participant in the psychological treatment process – if you have questions or concerns, let the psychologist know.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE ETHICAL CONDUCT OF A PSYCHOLOGIST?

Psychologists are governed in their professional practice by the Canadian Code of Ethics adopted by the College of Psychologists of New Brunswick. If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of a psychologist, you should first raise the issue with directly with the psychologist in question. If you are not satisfied with the outcome, you may wish to communicate with the Registrar of the College of Psychologists of New Brunswick, who will discuss the matter with you as well as advising on the appropriate process. The Registrar can be reached by telephone at 506.857.8280 or by e-mail as follows: jacques.richard@cpcb.ca.

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