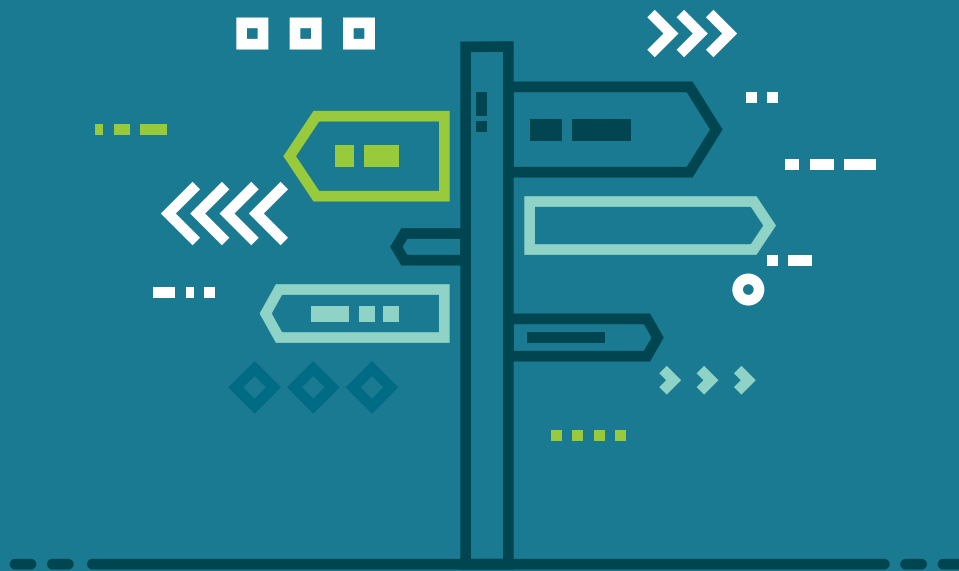


A GUIDE TO



COUNSELING

CAREER PATHS

UWA | ONLINE

INTRODUCTION

Counseling careers are in high demand. Some of the most recognizable types of counseling careers more than triple the average job growth for all occupation — at 7 percent by 2026, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

The statement holds true for perhaps the most obvious counseling career of mental health counseling. Mental health counselors are projected to grow 23 percent by 2026. The BLS organizes substance and behavioral disorder counselors under the same grouping with mental health counselors, and all of these roles have a projected growth rate of 23 percent by 2026.

Marriage and family therapists continue the trend with an employment increase of 23 percent by 2026. Finally, school and career counselors are expected to grow 13 percent over the same time period.

This guide begins by examining what the term “counseling” signifies. Then, three of the field’s most noteworthy careers — mental health, marriage and family, and school counseling — will be explored in further detail.

WHAT IS COUNSELING?

According to the American Counseling Association, delegates of 31 counseling organizations agreed on a single, unified definition of counseling: “a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.”

Counselors help clients overcome obstacles and challenges they are facing. Using strategies geared towards clients’ environments and needs, counselors help clients identify goals and potential solutions to problems. This is a collaborative effort between counselors and clients.

MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS

OVERVIEW

Mental health counselors treat people who are facing a variety of conditions, including grief, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, stress and suicidal thoughts. They help clients with a wide variety of mental and emotional health issues and relationship problems.

Here are some common tasks that these counselors typically perform:

- Evaluate client's mental and physical health and assess their readiness for treatment
- Develop and oversee treatment goals and plans with clients
- Help clients work on the necessary skills and behaviors to face relevant issues
- Refer clients to other resources and services, such as support groups
- Conduct outreach programs to help people identify the signs of destructive behavior

Mental health counselors work with individuals, families, couples and groups, and they can specialize within specific populations, such as children, college students and the elderly. Work environments include mental health centers, hospitals, government, prisons and in private practice.

Techniques can vary, based on clients' needs. There are various approaches to counseling that can be used depending on the situation at hand and the counselor's background and preferences.

For instance, many counselors combine behavioral therapy and cognitive theory into one form of theory, known as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), to treat a number of illnesses such as anxiety, eating, personality and substance abuse disorders. For instance, for specific phobia (an anxiety disorder that involves a fear of something, such as flying, heights or animals), CBT would involve strategies to view and cope with the feared object or situation. Alternative beliefs about fears would be a major focus (cognitively), and exposure therapy would concentrate on changing the client's response to the feared object or situation (behaviorally), using gradual exposure to the source of the fear.

How Effective is Mental Health Counseling?

"The efficacy of treatment for mental illness and substance abuse disorders is well documented and has improved dramatically over the past 50 years." – American Counseling Association

Not only is psychotherapy widely practiced, it is effective: Those who receive psychotherapy achieve much better outcomes than they would have had they not received psychotherapy. In clinical trials, psychotherapy has been shown to be effective in treating depression, anxiety, marital dissatisfaction, substance abuse, health problems (including smoking, pain and eating disorders) and sexual dysfunction, and with various populations, including children, adolescents, adults, and elders. – American Psychological Association."

COUNSELING CAREERS

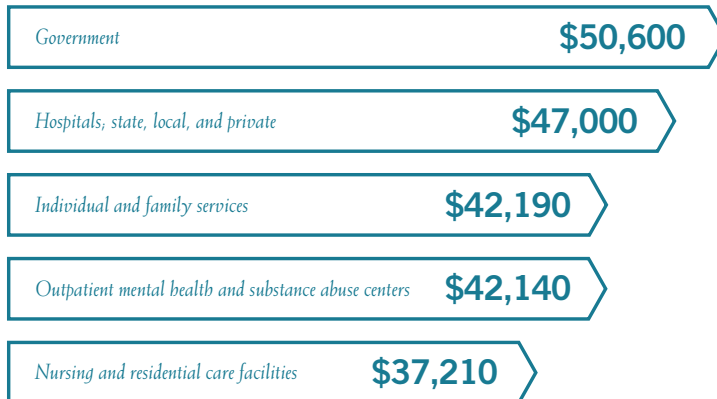
MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS

JOB REQUIREMENTS

To become a mental health counselor, a master's degree and 2,000 to 4,000 hours of supervised clinical experience is required in all states. The degree is typically in mental health counseling or psychology. Counselors must also pass a state-issued exam and complete continuing education every year.

SALARY AND OUTLOOK

The BLS groups mental health counselors with substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors. The median annual wage for all three careers is \$43,300. Figures for top industries are also available for these counselors.



Employment of mental health counselors is projected to grow 23 percent by 2026. People continue to seek mental health counseling services, and states are seeking treatment and counseling services for drug offenders instead of jail time. Another factor for this is a continued need for counselors to work with military veterans.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPISTS

OVERVIEW

Similar to mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists help people manage problems. However, the focus is on issues relating to families and other relationships.

Marriage and family therapists address a wide array of relationship issues within the context of the family system. They evaluate and treat mental and emotional disorders, as well as other health and behavioral problems. Marriage and family therapists take a holistic perspective to health care and are concerned with the overall, long-term well-being of clients and their families.

Here are some common tasks that these counselors typically perform:

- Encourage clients to discuss their thoughts, emotions and experiences
- Help clients examine their reactions and react to difficult changes in life, such as divorce
- Guide clients through making decisions about their future
- Assist clients with the strategies and skills to cope with difficult situations and alter their behavior
- Refer clients to other resources and services, such as support groups
- Complete and oversee confidential files and mandated records

Many marriage and family therapists work in private practice. Other work environments include mental health centers, substance abuse treatment centers, hospitals and employee assistance programs.



How Effective is Marriage and Family Therapy?

According to research cited by the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, marriage and family therapy is as effective, and in some cases more effective than, standard and/or individual treatments for many mental health problems such as: adult schizophrenia, affective (mood) disorders, adult alcoholism and drug abuse, children's conduct disorders, adolescent drug abuse, anorexia in young adult women, childhood autism, chronic physical illness in adults and children, and marital distress and conflict.

Techniques and tools use will depend on clients' situations. Like mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists often apply approaches such as CBT to help clients with negative thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Marriage and family therapists are able to treat a wide range of clinical problems including depression, marital problems, anxiety, individual psychological problems and child-parent problems.

COUNSELING CAREERS

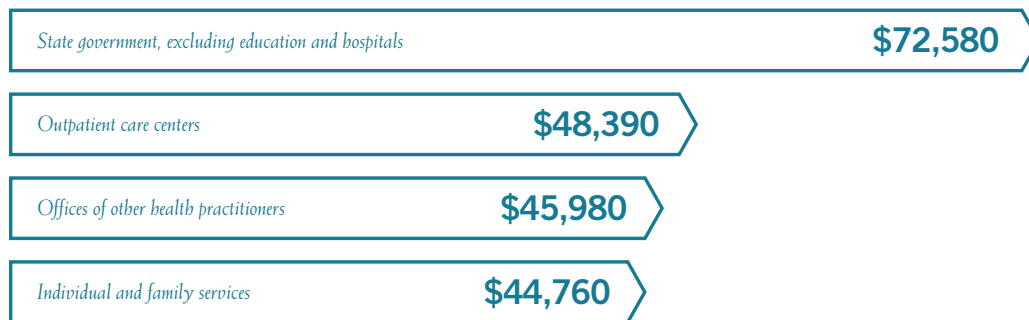
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPISTS

JOB REQUIREMENTS

To become a marriage and family therapist, a master's degree in psychology, marriage and family therapy, or a related mental health field is needed. For licensure in all states, marriage and family therapists need 2,000 to 4,000 of supervised clinical experience. Then candidates can take a state licensing exam or the national examination for marriage and family therapists conducted by the Association of Marital and Family Therapy Regulatory Boards.

SALARY AND OUTLOOK

The median annual wage for marriage and family therapists is \$48,790. Here are the figures for the top industries in which these counselors work.



Employment of marriage and family therapists is projected to grow 23 percent by 2026. Growth is expected due to an increase in the use of integrated care, which involves treatment of multiple problems at one time by a group of specialists. In this approach, marriage and family therapists work alongside counselors such as substance abuse, behavior disorder and mental health counselors, to address patients' issues as a team.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS

OVERVIEW

School counselors help students develop academic and social skills that lead to success. Some people may confuse school counseling with guidance counseling. This is natural, given the origins of the school counseling career; school counseling originated from guidance counseling.

"A few decades ago counselors were introduced into schools to assist students with occupational/vocational choices, college preparatory support, etc.," according to professional school counselor and psychotherapist, Marie Isom. "They were teachers that simply took a few extra classes and were then called 'guidance counselors.'"

A great deal has changed, however. Today, "we have state and local professional organizations (The American School Counselor Association – ASCA) that support us professionally and legislatively, standards we're required to follow, a requirement of (at minimum) a master's degree in counseling, and oftentimes counselors have specializations in other areas," Isom added. "[It's] a far cry from the persona of those that play counselors on television, in movies, and those that many of us experienced when we were in high school."

School counseling is now much more comprehensive than what guidance counseling used to cover. It is much more central to students' needs.

"School counselors are such a vital part of the school community," according to Dr. Nisha Warbington, associate professor of counseling at the University of West Alabama. "We are uniquely trained to handle a diverse set of students' needs from academic to career to social/emotional development needs. We are the advocates for all of our students and support them as they navigate their way to adulthood."

How Effective is School Counseling?

Research supports the value of school counseling for students across domains of academic development, college and career readiness, social/emotional development and more, according to the ASCA. Here are some examples of what several empirical studies from national peer-reviewed journals found while researching the impact and importance of school counseling programs.

- There are stronger student learning and behavioral outcomes associated with students who have access to school counselors. This is especially true for students in high-poverty schools.
- High school students who receive assistance from school counselors are more likely to apply for and enroll in college. They are also more likely to graduate from high school.
- School counselors can enhance students' ethnic identities, improve students' behavior and provide early identification of and prevention of depression and suicidal thoughts.
- Studies concentrating on multiple impacts found that school counseling positively impacts students' learning, behavior, mental health, misbehavior and social functioning.

COUNSELING CAREERS

SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Here are some tasks that these counselors typically perform:

- Evaluating students' abilities and interests through assessments, interviews and individual planning
- Identifying issues that affect school performance
- Helping students understand and overcome social or behavioral problems
- Helping students create plans to achieve academic and career goals
- Working with students to develop skills that help support academic and career goals
- Collaborating with teachers, administrators and parents to help students succeed
- Teaching students and school staff about specific topics, such as bullying, drug abuse and planning for college or careers after graduation
- Counseling individuals and small groups on the basis of student and school needs

Roles and responsibilities can vary based on the students' ages.

JOB REQUIREMENTS

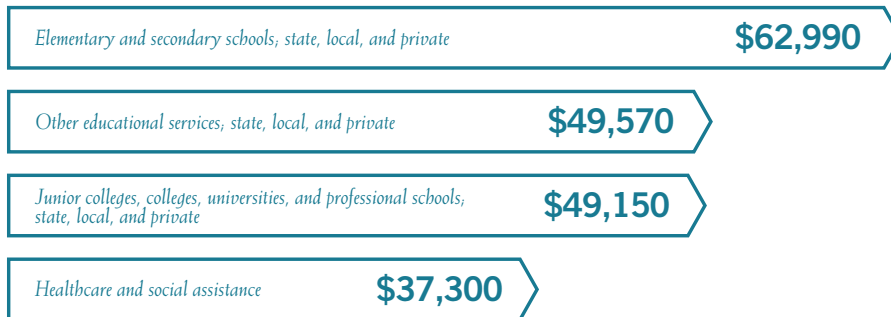
To become a school counselor, a master's degree in school counseling or a related field is required in nearly all states. Additionally, public school counselors need a state-issued credential to practice; this may be referred to as a certification, license or endorsement depending on the state. Licensure or certification typically requires a master's degree in school counseling or related field, supervised internship or practicum and successful completion of a test.

COUNSELING CAREERS

SCHOOL COUNSELORS

SALARY AND OUTLOOK

The BLS groups school and career counselors together. The median annual wage for school and career counselors is \$54,560. Figures for top industries are also available for these counselors.



Employment of school and career counselors is projected to grow 11 percent by 2026, which is faster than the average for all occupations. Factors for this growth include rising enrollments in elementary, middle and high schools. As enrollments grow, more counselors will be needed to respond to students' developmental and academic needs.

COMPARING

COUNSELING CAREERS

MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS

ROLE: Help clients with a wide variety of mental and emotional health issues and relationship problems

EDUCATION: Master's degree, supervised clinical experience and state-issued exam

\$43,300

OUTLOOK: 23% by 2026

MARRIAGE & FAMILY THERAPISTS

ROLE: Help clients with issues relating to families and other relationships

EDUCATION: Master's degree, supervised clinical experience and state/national exam

\$48,790

OUTLOOK: 23% by 2026

SCHOOL COUNSELORS

ROLE: Help students develop academic and social skills that lead to success

EDUCATION: Master's degree, state-issued credential (including supervised internship or practicum and successful completion of a test)

\$54,560

OUTLOOK: 11% by 2026

PURSUE YOUR COUNSELING CAREER WITH AN ONLINE DEGREE

The University of West Alabama offers psychology and counseling programs to help you reach your goals of becoming a counselor. Enhance your career with a fully online degree from one of Alabama's oldest and most prestigious universities.

- **M.ED. IN SCHOOL COUNSELING:** Prepare to provide advocacy, assessment, evaluation and a range of counseling services to students with the online master's in school counseling. You'll gain the knowledge and skills needed to help youth in educational environments in this role.
- **M.S. IN CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING:** Gain the knowledge and skills you need to provide support to people with the [online master's in clinical mental health counseling](#). You'll develop a deep understanding of counseling techniques, theories and principles that allow you to promote the mental health and wellness of clients across diverse populations.

You can also take a look at other [online degrees in psychology and counseling](#) that the University of West Alabama offers.

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