

THEORIES

Clinical Psychology History, Approaches, and Careers

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Clinical psychology is the [branch of psychology](#) concerned with the assessment and treatment of mental illness, abnormal behavior, and psychiatric problems. This field integrates the science of psychology with the treatment of complex human problems, making it an exciting career choice for people who are looking to work in a challenging and rewarding field.

History

[Early influences](#) on the field of clinical psychology include the work of the Austrian psychoanalyst [Sigmund Freud](#). He was one of the first to focus on the idea that mental illness was something that could be treated by talking with the patient, and it was the development of his talk therapy approach that is often cited as the earliest scientific use of clinical psychology.

American psychologist Lightner Witmer opened the first psychological clinic in 1896 with a specific focus on helping children who had learning disabilities. It was also Witmer who first introduced the term "clinical psychology" in a 1907 paper. Witmer, a former student of [Wilhelm Wundt](#), defined clinical psychology as "the study of individuals, by observation or experimentation, with the intention of promoting change."¹

By 1914, 26 other clinics devoted to the practice of clinical psychology had been established in the United States. Today, clinical psychology is one of

the most popular [subfields](#) and the single largest employment area within psychology.

Evolution During the World Wars

Clinical psychology became more established during the period of World War I as practitioners demonstrated the usefulness of psychological assessments. In 1917, the American Association of Clinical Psychology was established, although it was replaced just two years later with the establishment of the [American Psychological Association](#) (APA).

During World War II, clinical psychologists were called upon to help treat what was then known as shell shock, now referred to as [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD).

The demand for professionals to treat the many returning veterans in need of care contributed to the growth of clinical psychology during this period.

During the 1940s, the United States had no programs that offered a formal degree in clinical psychology. The U.S. Veterans Administration set up a number of doctoral-level training programs, and by 1950 more than half of all the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)-level degrees in psychology were awarded in the area of clinical psychology.

Changes in Focus

While the early focus in clinical psychology had been largely on science and research, graduate programs began adding additional emphasis on [psychotherapy](#). In clinical psychology Ph.D. programs, this approach is today referred to as the scientist-practitioner or Boulder Model. Later, the Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) degree option emerged, which placed a greater emphasis on professional practice rather than research. This practice-oriented doctorate degree in clinical psychology is known as the practitioner-scholar, or Vail model.²

The field has continued to grow tremendously, and the demand for clinical psychologists today remains strong.

Approaches

Clinical psychologists who work as psychotherapists often utilize different treatment approaches when working with clients. While some clinicians focus on a very specific treatment outlook, many use what is referred to as an

"eclectic approach." This involves drawing on different theoretical methods to develop the best treatment plan for each individual client.

Some of the major theoretical perspectives within clinical psychology include:

- **Psychodynamic approach:** This perspective grew out of Freud's work; he believed that the unconscious mind plays an important role in our behavior. Psychologists who utilize [psychoanalytic therapy](#) may use techniques such as free association to investigate a client's underlying, unconscious motivations.³
- **Cognitive behavioral perspective:** This approach to clinical psychology developed from the behavioral and cognitive schools of thought. Clinical psychologists using this perspective will look at how a client's feelings, behaviors, and thoughts interact. [Cognitive-behavioral therapy](#) (CBT) often focuses on changing thoughts and behaviors that contribute to psychological distress.⁴
- **Humanistic perspective:** This approach to clinical psychology grew out of the work of humanist thinkers such as Abraham Maslow and [Carl Rogers](#). This perspective looks at the client more holistically and is focused on such things as [self-actualization](#).⁵

Education Requirements

In the United States, clinical psychologists usually have a doctorate in psychology and receive training in clinical settings. The educational requirements to work in clinical psychology are quite rigorous, and most clinical psychologists spend between four to six years in graduate school after [earning a bachelor's degree](#).⁶

Generally speaking, Ph.D. programs are centered on research, while Psy.D. programs are practice-oriented. Students may also find some graduate programs that offer a terminal master's degree in clinical psychology.

Before choosing a clinical psychology program, you should always check to be sure that the program is accredited by the APA. After completing an accredited graduate training program, prospective clinical psychologists must also complete a period of supervised training and an examination.

Specific licensure requirements vary by state, so you should check with your state's licensing board to learn more.

Students in the United Kingdom can pursue a doctorate level degree in clinical psychology (D.Clin.Psychol. or Clin.Psy.D.) through programs sponsored by the National Health Service.⁷ These programs are generally very competitive and are focused on both research and practice. Students interested in enrolling in one of these programs must have an undergraduate degree in a psychology program approved by the British Psychological Society in addition to experience requirements.

Opportunities

[Clinical psychologists](#) work in a variety of settings (hospitals, clinics, private practice, universities, schools, etc.) and in many capacities. All of them require these professionals to draw on their expertise in special ways and for different purposes.

Some of the job roles performed by those working in clinical psychology can include:

- Assessment and diagnosis of [psychological disorders](#), such as in a medical setting
- Treatment of [psychological disorders](#), including drug and alcohol addiction
- Offering testimony in legal settings
- Teaching, often at the university level
- Conducting research
- Creating and administering programs to treat and prevent social problems

Some clinical psychologists may focus on one of these or provide several of these services. For example, someone may work directly with clients who are admitted to a hospital for psychological disorders, while also running a private therapeutic office that offers short-term and long-term outpatient services to those who need help coping with psychological distress.

A Word From Verywell

Clinical psychology is one of the most popular areas in psychology, but it's important to evaluate your interests before deciding if this area might be right for you. If you enjoy working with people and are able to handle stress and conflict well, clinical psychology may be an excellent choice. The field of clinical psychology will continue to grow and evolve thanks to the changing needs of the population, as well as shifts in approaches to healthcare policy.

If you're still unsure whether clinical psychology is right for you, [taking a psychology career self-test](#) may help.

[Overview of Developmental Psychology](#)

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Article Sources

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