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Thinking of seeing a psychologist? Here's what you need to know

By Jenny Demark

Psychology is the scientific study of the mind and behaviour. It is a very broad field, with branches studying neuroscience, development, social behaviour, learning, memory and perception, to name just a few. Psychologists are interested in learning about people, animals, organizations and societies.

What is a clinical psychologist?

Clinical psychologists provide mental and behavioural health care for children, adolescents, adults, couples and families. They work to improve the lives of others through comprehensive assessment, diagnostic clarification, therapy and education.

Like dentists, physiotherapists and physicians, psychologists are one of the regulated health professionals in Ontario. They have completed a rigorous training and licensing process. They typically have a PhD in clinical psychology (although some are authorized to practise with a master's degree) that required comprehensive coursework, independent research and clinical training. They have completed thousands of hours of supervised clinical work and they have passed three exams to assess their understanding of psychology, the relevant laws that govern psychology, ethics and clinical practice guidelines. They are required to complete ongoing professional development and to keep up-to-date with the regulations developed by the College of Psychologists of Ontario.

Who might want to see a clinical psychologist?

People see psychologists for so many reasons, way too many to describe here. For the most part, people work with psychologists to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their children or their relationships. You may be wondering if your child is developing in a typical manner. You may want to explore how a past trauma is affecting your current relationships. Or you may want to improve communication between you and your spouse. Psychologists are uniquely qualified to assess, diagnose and treat mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, addictions) and developmental concerns (e.g., ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities).

to treatment, their fees and the frequency of sessions. Depending on the nature of your concerns, they may want to complete standardized testing or questionnaires to better understand your child's thinking skills, behaviour or emotions.

Do not be afraid to ask questions, lots of them! Psychologists want you to feel comfortable and they are obligated to keep you informed every step of the way. Research has shown that strong, collaborative and trusting relationships with your psychologist is one of the best predictors of positive therapeutic outcomes.

How do I find a clinical psychologist?

Psychologists can be found working in hospitals, schools, mental health clinics or private practices. If they are in private practice, their services are not covered by OHIP, but they may be covered by employee assistance programs or insurance. Some psychologists provide pro bono services to certain communities.

The Ottawa Academy of Psychology, www.ottawa-psychologists.ca, is a great place to start your search. The academy maintains a searchable online directory of psychologists working in the community. You can search for a psychologist with expertise in the issue you want to work on and you can refine your search based on the psychologist's location in the city, language spoken and age range of clientele.

Even if you are just starting to think about seeing a psychologist, it is worth putting your name on some waiting lists, which can be lengthy. Do not wait for a crisis situation to occur before reaching out for help.

Where can I learn more?

The Canadian Psychological Association, www.cpa.ca, has lots of useful information about the practice of psychology in Canada. They also have several factsheets that explain diagnosis and treatment for many mental health concerns, such as mood disorders, pain management, coping with a crisis and developmental disabilities.

The Ontario Psychological Association, www.psych.on.ca, supports the nearly 4,000 psychologists practicing in the province by providing continuing education and professional resources. They also have useful information