

SOCIETY OF  
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY



DIVISION 12  
American Psychological Association

# Definition and Description of the Field of Clinical Psychology

This **Definition and Description of the Field of Clinical Psychology** establishes a shared understanding and common description for use within the Society of Clinical Psychology.

- A. Knowledge Base and Professional Skills in Clinical Psychology: The field of Clinical Psychology involves research, teaching and services relevant to the applications of principles, methods, and procedures for understanding, predicting, preventing and/or alleviating intellectual, emotional, biological, psychological, social and behavioral maladjustment, disability and discomfort, applied to a wide range of client populations. In theory, training, and practice, Clinical Psychology strives to recognize the importance of diversity and strives to understand the roles of gender, culture, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of diversity. Skills include, but are not limited to:
1. Assessing and/or diagnosing the nature and causes and predicting the effects of subjective distress; of personal, social, and work dysfunctions; and of the psychological and emotional factors involved in, and consequent to, physical disease and disability. Procedures may include but are not limited to, interviewing, behavioral assessment, administering and interpreting tests of intellectual and cognitive abilities, aptitudes, emotions, motivations, personality characteristics, and other aspects of human experience and behavior relative to disturbance.
  2. Intervening at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. This includes interventions directed at preventing, treating, and correcting the psychopathology, emotional conflicts, personality disturbances, and skills deficits underlying a person's distress and/or dysfunction. In addition to the treatment of diagnosed mental disorders, it also includes interventions to promote health and adjustment. Interventions may reflect a variety of theoretical orientations, techniques, and modalities. These may include, for example, psychotherapies (e.g., cognitive and, behavioral, psychodynamic, humanistic), marital and family therapy, group therapy, social learning approaches, biofeedback, cognitive retraining and rehabilitation, community level interventions, electronic interventions, and environmental consultation and design. Psychopathology is intended here to be interpreted broadly to include and transcend traditional categories of mental illness (e.g., the disorders of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). All areas of emotional, cognitive behavioral and biomedical patterns that produce distress, dysfunction, disorder or disease are included. Clinical Psychological intervention promotes satisfaction, adaptation, social order and health.
  3. Professional consultation, program development, supervision, administration, and evaluation of clinical psychological services.

4. The knowledge base of Clinical Psychology includes many areas that are not within the expertise of every Clinical Psychologist.
- B. Areas of Knowledge in Clinical Psychology: The broad general areas of psychological knowledge not unique to Clinical Psychology are spelled out in many documents, such as the current criteria for doctoral program accreditation of the APA and the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology criteria for psychology graduate programs. They include course work in the biological, social, and cognitive/affective bases of behavior and in individual differences. Clinical Psychology has a focus on advanced work in the areas of personality and psychopathology. This work includes the full span of psychopathological disorders and conditions, their etiologies, their environments, their degrees of severity, their developmental levels, and the appropriate assessments and interventions that are associated with these conditions. Substantial course work in the areas of personality and psychopathology helps the Clinical Psychologist work toward a comprehensive understanding of normal and abnormal adjustment and maladjustment across the life span. The Clinical Psychologist should be educated and trained to generate and integrate scientific and professional knowledge, attitude, and skills so as to further psychological science, the professional practice of psychology, and human welfare.
- C. Major Skill Areas in the Field of Clinical Psychology include:
1. **Assessment:** Assessment of adjustment and maladjustment involves the interviewing of the client/patient and often of significant others. It also involves being able to make appropriate behavioral observations, and to administer a wide range of psychological tests and techniques designed to assess the individual's intellectual, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral and biological functioning. The ability to assess not only individuals but also group and family processes is another important skill of many Clinical Psychologists. Appropriate assessment involves selection of assessment methods, taking into account the applicability of norms and standards to particular populations, appropriate application of assessment tools, interpretation of results of individual tests, integration of results, and the recognition of psychological strengths in addition to psychological deficits. Preparation in Clinical Psychology ordinarily includes substantial course work in assessment plus additional supervised practica. Proper consideration should be given to issues relating to the appropriate use of assessments for special populations.
  2. **Intervention:** Formulation of an appropriate plan for treatment or intervention involves integration of knowledge of the client's adjustment and/or maladjustment from appropriate assessment, and theoretical and empirical understanding of adjustment and/or maladjustment, and from knowledge of intervention and treatment choices.

Intervention involves informing the client of the treatment plan and options; establishing a working, collaborative relationship with the client/patient; implementing the treatment plan over an appropriate period of time; evaluating the effectiveness of the program, and making changes in the treatment plan where appropriate. Preparation in Clinical Psychology ordinarily includes substantial course work in intervention techniques plus appropriate supervised practica and a one year full time clinical internship. Many clinical psychologists pursue postdoctoral training, and all clinical psychologists take continuing professional education courses to ensure their skills are current and relevant.. Due consideration should be given to issues relating to the appropriate use of treatments for special populations.

3. Consultation with other professionals and nonprofessionals.
  4. The skill areas in Clinical Psychology include many areas that are not within the expertise of every Clinical Psychologist. Important examples are program development, supervision, administration of psychological services, and evaluation and planning of these services.
  5. The conduct of research contributing to knowledge in all the above areas of clinical psychology including basic processes associated with psychopathology, a formal demonstration of research skills, and knowledge of research methods is part of training in Clinical Psychology.
  6. Knowledge of ethical and professional standards and application of these in a consistent manner.
- D. Populations: The Clinical Psychology profession includes Clinical Psychologists who deal with a wide variety of populations. The Clinical Psychology profession includes Clinical Psychologists who deal with the full range of adjustment and maladjustment from individuals with minor problems of living to individuals with serious mental illness. The Clinical Psychology profession includes Clinical Psychologists who deal with individuals at all developmental levels including infants and geriatric patients and who may work with a single individual or with groups (families, patients of similar psychopathology, organizations). Clinical Psychologists also work with those with medical problems and disabilities and they help patients adjust to their disabilities and altered life style. Clinical Psychologists also work with persons without mental illness to promote adaptation, adjustments and personal development. The inclusion of individuals from special populations attests to the breadth and diversity of the field.
- E. Service Settings: Clinical Psychologists, as well as other psychologists, work in a variety of settings including individual practice, mental health facilities and service units, managed health care organizations, hospitals, long term care facilities, rehabilitation centers, schools, universities, industries, legal systems, medical departments, counseling centers, government agencies, and the military.

- F. Skill Areas in Clinical Psychology: Clinical Psychologists are broadly trained, and use a wide variety of assessment, treatment, and intervention modalities. No single skill is unique to Clinical Psychology. The uniqueness of Clinical Psychology comes from the fact that the field brings the integration of science, theory, and practice to bear on populations manifesting a wide range of physical health/illness, adjustment and/or maladjustment, and/or psychopathology. Clinical Psychologists use a wide variety of assessment, treatment, and intervention modalities. It is not only that the variety characterizes the field, but that individual Clinical Psychologists are broadly trained.
- G. Education and Training Programs in this Field: SCP believes the APA accreditation process is the most reliable criterion for an appropriate training program.
- H. Public Need and Pattern of Practice of Clinical Psychology: Epidemiological evidence suggests that psychopathology, maladjustment, and distress are widespread throughout the world and, thus, Clinical Psychological services are widely needed.
- I. Services Provided by Clinical Psychologists: Clinical Psychologists perform a wide range of activities in many different settings.
- J. Efficacy of Clinical Psychological Activities: Research documenting the efficacy of clinical psychological activities is found in many journals including the Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, the Journal of Pediatric Psychology, the Journal of Abnormal Psychology, the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, and The Clinical Psychologist, among others. The contents of these journals, and other reputable psychological journals, support the empirical base of Clinical Psychology.
- K. Ongoing Evaluation of Clinical Psychology: Clinical Psychology training programs engage in annual self-study to ensure quality and as part of accreditation procedures.
- L. Assessment and Identification of Qualifications for Practice in Clinical Psychology: Currently there are three widely recognized mechanisms for the identification of qualifications for the practice of Clinical Psychology. Other mechanisms are available for specific purposes.
  - 1. Clinical Psychology programs are accredited by the American Psychological Association. Earned doctorates from Clinical Psychology programs represent a significant credential establishing participation in the field of Clinical Psychology.
  - 2. Licensing/certification as a Clinical Psychologist is a second form of identification, in many states. However, in many jurisdictions, licensure/certification is generic (i.e., one is licensed/certified as a psychologist and required legally and ethically to limit one's practice to areas of defined competence).
  - 3. Advanced standing as a clinical psychologist is demonstrated by board certification by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). Clinical Psychologists who apply for board certification undertake a

thorough evaluation by their peers on their knowledge and skills in  
Clinical Psychology.