

## *Frequently Asked Questions about Education & Training in Health Psychology*

What is the difference between a PsyD and PhD in health psychology?

Traditionally, PhD programs tend to emphasize training to conduct empirical research, whereas PsyD programs tend to emphasize training in practice. Of course, this distinction is relative and there is substantial variability within programs of the same degree type. For example, some PsyD programs require considerable training in conducting empirical research, while some PhD programs emphasize training in practice.

Potential applicants will benefit from examining the particulars of various programs (including specific curriculum requirements, faculty interests, and practicum opportunities) to determine which program characteristics match best with your own interests and background. Increasingly, graduate programs make this type of information available on their web sites. A good place to start is the *APA Guide to Graduate Study*, an excellent compendium of graduate programs (available at most university libraries and online). In addition, comparison of programs outcomes can be obtained from the following article:

Larkin, K.T. (2009). Variations of Doctoral Training Programs in Clinical Health Psychology: Lessons Learned at the Box Office. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 3(4), 202–211.

***Clinical Health vs. other specialties.*** What is the difference between a clinical health psychology degree and an experimental health psychology degree? Further, which career positions are best suited to which degrees?

Generally speaking, doctoral programs offering a degree in clinical or counseling psychology with a health emphasis (most often called “clinical health”) seek to prepare students broadly as scientist-practitioner psychologists with a special focus on applying their clinical skills to health issues. Graduates of these programs typically are license-eligible as psychologists and go onto a variety of career positions combining research and practice in many different configurations. By contrast, experimental health programs tend to prepare students for careers centered on health psychology research rather than patient care. Accordingly, for those interested in a career involving any degree of patient care, clinical (or counseling) health tends to be the best fit. Those interested in pure research careers may find experimental programs a better match.

What are the competence areas for clinical health psychologists?

Clinical health psychologists are broadly trained as clinical or counseling psychologists with additional training in health. Accordingly, the full range of competencies necessary for these psychologists is quite extensive. Unfortunately, a brief Q and A format does not allow for the detailed discussion this important topic is due. However, there are many excellent resources you may wish to consult such as:

France, C. R., Masters, K. S., Belar, C. D., Kerns, R. D., Klonoff, E. A., Larkin, K. T., et al. (2008). Application of the competency model to clinical health psychology. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 39, 573–580.

Kerns, R. D., Berry, S., Frantsve, L. M. E. & Linton, J. C. (2009). Life-long competency development in clinical health psychology. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 3*, 212-217.

Masters, K.S., France, C.R., & Thorn, B.E. (2009). Enhancing preparation among entry level clinical health psychologists: Recommendations for "Best Practices" from the first meeting of CCHPTP (Council of Clinical Health Psychology Training Programs). *Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 3*, 193-201.

American Psychological Association's Archival description of clinical health psychology [[www.apa.org/crsppp/health.html](http://www.apa.org/crsppp/health.html)].

### Questions about preparation/training in health psychology

*At the undergraduate level.* What kind of undergraduate (or graduate) experience can really reflect the work of health psychologists? What can I do now (for undergrads) to best prepare myself for a graduate career in health psychology?

Most undergraduate psychology programs offer coursework in health psychology. However, interested undergraduates can enhance their didactic experiences by seeking out or cultivating other opportunities. For instance, most faculty members with active research programs welcome undergraduates on their research teams. Such research participation is an excellent way to familiarize yourself with certain areas of health that may be of special interest to you and to actually participate in the full spectrum of research activities (from study conceptualization to dissemination of results), which will prepare you for graduate study. Additional opportunities to get involved in health-related research may also be available through other departments (e.g., medicine, nursing, physical therapy, etc.) In addition, if your undergraduate program has a Psi Chi chapter or psychology club of some sort, get involved. Many of these groups provide exposure to health psychology topics and learning experiences. You might even talk with one of your favorite faculty members about starting a health psychology interest group at your school. Furthermore, great preparation for graduate work in health psychology would include a broad psychology background (e.g., social, abnormal, cognitive neuroscience, developmental and definitely psychobiology) but also biology, anatomy, and even a public health course if that is possible in your university.

*At the graduate level.* If my graduate program does not have a health psychology focus, what are some ways I can maximize my exposure to this field of study (i.e., the website, journal, workshops, dissertation, practicum training, annual meetings, journals in other related fields, etc.)?

It certainly is possible to enhance exposure through all these options. Taking public health and nursing classes (e.g., epidemiology, health policy) are good options. Go to conferences (and watch for health psych preconferences at larger, more general conferences) and also seek out those summer courses that are offered from time to time on related topics by NIH and other organizations.

Even if your clinical or counseling doctoral program does not offer formal health psychology training, it may be that some faculty are engaged in health psychology research and may welcome the involvement of interested students. Or, perhaps, in consultation with current

faculty, you can develop a dissertation with a health emphasis or a health-related dimension. Alternately, you might consult your Director of Clinical Training about the possibility of health-relevant practica or other opportunities s/he may recommend. Having acquired as many health-relevant training experiences as possible at your current site, you will be better prepared to pursue internship and post-doctoral training in clinical health psychology.

*Funding-related.* What loan repayment programs are available for early career health psychologists (experimental and clinical)?

There are many early-career awards offered by a variety of sources including professional organizations (e.g., APA, SBM) as well as funding agencies (e.g., NIH, <http://grants.nih.gov/training/>). In addition, special loan repayment programs are emerging for professionals willing to work in underserved areas (e.g., National Health Service Corps). Your funding agency may be helpful in connecting you to some of these opportunities.

Practicum-related questions. What types of practicum experiences are most useful for graduate students interested in health psychology? What type of practicum opportunities/clinical training experiences should a health psychology graduate student be pursuing? What practicum experiences are recommended for students applying to internships in clinical health psychology?

At the doctoral level, training should be broadly-based. This means that you'll want to take advantage of a variety of practicum opportunities focused on different areas of clinical or counseling psychology, including (but not limited to) health psychology. Take advantage of training opportunities in a variety of different health settings (e.g., inpatient, outpatient, community health) with a broad diversity of clients and presenting concerns. In addition, at each site, seek to acquire a broad a range of skills by immersing yourself in as many supervised activities as are available to you (e.g., assessment, intervention, report writing, consultation/liason, community outreach etc.). Such a broad-based foundation will prepare you to more finely hone your skills on internship and perhaps during post doctoral training.

Post-doc related questions. What are the post-doctoral opportunities available for health psychology students? Are there pre/post doc opportunities for Health psychologists?

There are increasing numbers of post-doctoral training opportunities in health psychology. Some of the most interesting combine internship and post-doctoral training in a two-year sequence. NIH supports a number of training grants that are appropriate for health psychologists, and these tend to provide opportunities for both pre and post-docs (<http://grants.nih.gov/training/>) The VA and military branches provide training (<http://www.research.va.gov/training/other.cfm>), and there is also some private foundation support for post-docs, such as through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (<http://www.rwjf.org/grants/>) and others. And of course individualized post-docs with health psychology professors are also possible, and these are sometimes funded with the NRSA mechanism.

Board Certification Questions. I'm a graduate health psychology student interested in becoming board certified (ABPP) in clinical health psychology. What steps should I be taking in order to pursue this? What is board certification, and how does a clinical health psychologist become board certified?

The ABPP website has explicit answers to these questions at: <http://www.abpp.org>

Questions related to health psychology research. What kind of research does a health psychologist do?

Research examining the biological, psychological, and social (biopsychosocial) dimensions of health is virtually limitless in its possible scope and content. Studies span the continuum of care (from primary prevention to palliative care) around the full spectrum of health-related areas (e.g., from AIDS to Zinc intake and beyond) as applied across the lifespan. For some specific examples see, for instance, American Psychological Association's Archival description of clinical health psychology [available at <http://www.apa.org/ed/graduate/specialize/health.aspx> <http://www.rwjf.org/grants/>]. Or thumb through several recent issues of the journal *Health Psychology*, available at most university libraries [see especially the special section on the future of health psychology in volume 23(2)].

Questions related to practice settings

*Medical Settings.* How can clinical health psychology be applied in a primary care/medical setting? Do health psychologists work in physicians' offices? Work in a hospital? How do health psychologists work in conjunction with psychiatrists and primary care physicians, both in research and clinical settings?

Interdisciplinary collaboration is an inherent aspect of health psychology. Accordingly, many health psychologists work in collaboration with other health providers in a variety of health-related settings. For an excellent description of this work, see the most recent edition of the classic reference authored by Belar & Deardorff entitled *Clinical Health Psychology in Medical Settings* (available from the APA online bookstore)

*Diversity of Settings.* Can a health psychologist be a clinical psychologist that works in a hospital and/or a research psychologist who works in an academic department?

As scientist-practitioners, clinical health psychologists are trained to integrate research and practice in whatever setting they find themselves, no matter what their primary job title. This means that health psychologists' research is clinically-informed and their practice is infused with a scientific attitude. The scientist-practitioner approach prepares health psychologists to work in a wide variety of settings (including hospitals and universities) and perform myriad tasks. Conversely, a health psychologist with an experimental training background may work in academia or industry.

Some health psychologists work in government or private agency settings to influence public policy on health issues. This work might involve lobbying government agencies, addressing inequalities in health care or advising governmental bodies on health care reform.

*Combined clinical/research settings.* Do many health psychologists work in combined clinical/research settings?

As scientist-practitioners, clinical health psychologists are ideally suited to work in combined clinical/research settings.

Questions about Health Psych Resources. What are some of the main communication resources for health psychology research and practice?

Myriad health psychology resources now exist ranging from peer-reviewed journals to on-line networking sites and discussion groups. Given the depth and breadth of health psychology, many resources are specialized according to specific health psychology focus areas or interest groups. A good place to start is with the APA Division of Health Psychology website that links to numerous resources as well as the division journal *Health Psychology*.

Questions about the future of health psychology. What do current Health Psychologists see as the future of Health Psychology? Is there an academic future for health psychologists?

The answer varies with who you ask, but there is a strong neurological, immunological, and genetic focus in research. The growing recognition that behavioral factors significantly influence current morbidity and mortality patterns is completely consistent with health psychology's biopsychosocial approach. As specialists in behavior and lifestyle change, health psychologists are uniquely situated to help address the nation's most pressing health problems. For a recent discussion, see the special section on the future of health psychology in the journal *Health Psychology* [volume 23(2)].

There is definitely an academic future for health psychologists. The programs may not call themselves "health psychology" programs, but departments are happy to offer health psychology courses if you want to teach them and students flock to these courses in droves – they tend to attract a broader cross-section of a university than other psychology courses.

Miscellaneous. Salary. What is the average salary of clinical health psychologists?

Salaries vary widely depending on myriad factors including (a) the psychologist's level and type of training, area of specialization/expertise and experience level; (b) practice setting; (c) geographic location; and (d) market conditions. For more specific data, consult:

<http://www.apa.org/workforce/publications/10-fac-sal/index.aspx>,

<http://chronicle.com/stats/aaup/>

<http://www1.salary.com/Professor-Psychology-salary.html>