

“What Does a Clinical Social Worker Do?”

Clinical social workers have studied the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders much as other mental health professionals but with a different focus. Social workers are trained to see mental health problems in a “person-in-environment” perspective. What this means is that when social workers are assessing the cause of mental health problems, they first look at potential stressors in the client’s environment and seek to alleviate or correct these stressors. This understanding is based on Abraham Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” which indicates that basic survival needs and safety needs must be met before psychological needs can be met. For example, if someone is homeless and feels unsafe where he/she is living, potential mental health problems cannot be accurately diagnosed until that individual has a safe place to reside.

Clinical social workers are employed in a variety of settings including hospitals, rehab facilities, schools, long- term care agencies and private practices. They utilize the same guide as other mental health practitioners to diagnose mental health problems and get reimbursed from insurance companies: The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV-TR (also known as the DSM IV-TR).

Geriatric clinical social workers incorporate their social work training as well as their specialized knowledge about the unique challenges of aging in our society into their treatment of clients. Typically, an initial evaluation gathers information about the client that helps the clinical social worker make a determination about what the main problem is and how it may best be addressed. This information is incorporated into a treatment plan and attainable goals are established to guide treatment. Treatment continues as long as the clinical social worker and client are working effectively together and the client is working towards the goals established in the treatment plan. When these goals have been met, treatment is terminated unless a new problem has arisen, for which more treatment is required.

Clinical social workers bring a unique perspective in the work that they do, particularly those with a specialized approach to treating geriatric clients. As our population continues to age at a rapid rate, geriatric social workers will be more and more essential to help their clients manage the challenges that old age brings.

