

Marriage & Family Therapist

Snapshot

Career Cluster(s): Human Services

Interests: Counseling, family counseling, human relationships, conflict resolution, psychology, health

Earnings (Median): \$50,090 yearly; \$24.08 hourly

Employment & Outlook: Much Faster Than Average Growth

OVERVIEW

Sphere of Work

Marriage and Family Therapists (MFT), are specialists who use a variety of psychotherapeutic models to treat dysfunctional marriages, provide premarital counseling, and offer divorce and post-divorce counseling. Some MFTs may choose to specialize in diagnosing and treating couples, families, or specific age groups. Some of the most common problems they see are related to communication, trust, and intimacy. When a problem is beyond their professional scope, they may refer clients to psychiatrists, medical personnel, clergy, lawyers, or other professionals. While it is common for clergy members and



others to give advice to couples, only MFTs are licensed counseling professionals.

Work Environment

Most marriage and family therapists work independently in private practices. Daytime office hours are typical, although Marriage and family therapists are often required to be on call for emergencies during nights, weekends, and holidays. They may choose to meet clients at those times as well. Their offices are usually arranged with comfortable furnishings conducive to communicating with their clients.

Profile

Interests: Data, People
Working Conditions: Work Inside
Physical Strength: Light Work
Education Needs: Master's Degree, Doctoral Degree
Licensure/Certification: Required
Physical Abilities Not Required: Not Climb, Not Handle, Not Kneel
Opportunities for Experience: Internship
Holland Interest Score*: SEC

* See Appendix A

treat couples without discrimination. Objectivity and critical thinking are imperative to the work. As the job can entail a high level of stress, Marriage and family therapists must also be strong emotionally and physically.

Occupation Interest

The marriage counseling profession attracts people who want to help others and who value the role of marriage both in society and in achieving personal satisfaction. They must have excellent listening and reasoning skills, oral and written communication, and the ability to handle sensitive issues confidentially and professionally. Therapists must be willing to

A Day in the Life—Duties and Responsibilities

Marriage and family therapists treat clients who have taken the initiative to receive counseling and those who have been referred to them by doctors, judges, or clergy members. Most often, a couple, or one partner, contacts a marriage therapist when the relationship is at a critical stage, although premarital counseling and post-divorce counseling are also becoming common. The average counseling session lasts one hour each week. A marriage therapist may hold weekly sessions with clients over the course of several weeks or months. Short-term therapy, lasting twelve weeks or less, is typical. A busy

therapist must be able to respond to the needs of multiple couples each day.

The goal of premarital counseling is to ensure that a couple is compatible; to uncover any emotional problems that might later get in the way of a successful, fulfilling marriage; and to teach a couple useful skills for dealing with conflict resolution and communication. Some therapists offer group sessions for many couples at once.

The goal of marriage counseling is to get a couple to work out the issues that are threatening their marriage. The therapist's first task is to diagnose the heart of the problem. He or she may give the couple a test or survey and then use those results as a springboard for discussions. The therapist listens, questions, observes, and takes notes. He or she may assign homework, such as reading a chapter in a book or asking the couple to practice certain communication techniques. As the treatment plan unfolds, the therapist assesses its progress. At some point, the therapist may decide to switch to another therapy model or to meet with the individuals separately in addition to the regular session.

Preparatory work for each session may involve reviewing notes, reading select professional materials, or consulting with other professionals. Post-session work may involve billing or submitting a claim to an insurance company.

Duties and Responsibilities

- **Collecting data about clients by using testing, interview, discussion and observational techniques**
- **Evaluating data to determine the nature and sources of clients' concerns**
- **Determining the advisability of counseling clients or referring them to other specialists in such fields as medicine, psychiatry or legal aid**
- **Counseling clients on concerns such as unsatisfactory relationships between marriage partners, divorce and separation, child rearing, home management and financial difficulties**
- **Assisting clients in understanding and gaining insight into the causes of their problems, defining goals and planning action to eliminate or correct problems**

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Physical Environment

Marriage and family therapists usually work in comfortable office settings that pose few environmental risks. Most work independently in private practices. Some therapists form partnerships or group practices. Others work in mental health centers. Marriage and family therapists work in a variety of settings, such as mental health centers, substance abuse treatment centers, and hospitals. They also work in private practice and in Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), which are mental health programs that some employers provide to help employees deal with personal problems.

Relevant Skills and Abilities

Communication Skills

- Expressing thoughts and ideas
- Speaking effectively
- Writing concisely

Interpersonal/Social Skills

- Being sensitive to others
- Cooperating with others
- Counseling others
- Providing support to others

Organization & Management Skills

- Coordinating tasks
- Making decisions
- Managing people/groups
- Performing duties which change frequently

Research & Planning Skills

- Developing evaluation strategies
- Using logical reasoning

Human Environment

Marriage and family therapists interact most often with their clients. Depending on the size of the practice, interaction with others may be minimal or may involve communicating with a full staff of office personnel, such as a receptionist, billing clerk, therapists, and other mental health professionals. Some may report to an administrator or director, while experienced therapists may oversee interns.

Technological Environment

Marriage and family therapists depend heavily on computers for scheduling, billing, record keeping, research, and other procedures. Cellphones, answering machines, and other standard office equipment are also commonly used.

College/Postsecondary

Most states require at least marriage and family therapists to have a master's degree and a license to practice. An internship is a requirement of the master's degree in psychology, marriage and family therapy, or a related mental health field. A bachelor's degree in most fields is acceptable to enter one of these master's degree programs. A doctoral degree is usually needed for administrative positions, professorships, or consulting. Undergraduate students should research and apply to master's and doctoral programs that are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE).

Related College Majors

- Individual & Family Development Studies
- Psychology, General

Adult Job Seekers

Marriage and family therapy can be a good fit for those with a background in psychology, social work, or education. The lengthy and expensive educational requirements may be a major drawback for those with family responsibilities of their own; some scholarships and distance education courses can help.

Advancement is highly dependent on experience and education. A therapist employed in a large practice or institution may be able to advance to an administrative or managerial position, or establish his or her own practice, where the earnings tend to be the highest. Other opportunities for advancement include teaching, consulting, and research.

Professional Certification and Licensure

All states require marriage and family therapists to be licensed. Licensure requires a master's degree and 2,000 to 4,000 hours of postdegree supervised clinical experience, sometimes referred to as an internship or residency. In addition, therapists must pass a state-recognized exam and complete annual continuing education classes.

Additional certification may be required or desired for some jobs, obtained from a professional association such as the National Board

for Certified Therapists or the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Requirements for certification are similar to licensure requirements. Consult credible professional associations within the field and follow professional debate as to the relevancy and value of any certification program.

Candidates gain hands-on experience through postdegree supervised clinical work, sometimes referred to as an internship or residency. In training, they learn to provide family therapy, group therapy, psychotherapy, and other therapeutic interventions, under the supervision of a licensed counselor.



Additional Requirements

Marriage and family therapists must have a high level of integrity and ethics as they work with their clients' personal information; members of professional associations must conform to their associations'

Code of Ethics. Those who intend to establish private practices also need business skills and knowledge about health plan policies and procedures.

Fast Fact

Marrying your best friend cuts divorce risk by 70 percent and elevates the chances the marriage will last a lifetime

Source: Brightside.me

EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT

Earnings of marriage and family therapists depend on whether or not they are in private practice, their level and area of education and their experience. Those in private practice tend to earn the highest salaries. Some marriage and family therapists work for social service agencies and have a private practice or do consulting and research work to supplement their incomes.

The median annual wage for marriage and family therapists was \$50,090 in May 2018. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$31,850, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$82,240.

In May 2018, the median annual wages for marriage and family therapists in the top industries in which they worked were as follows:

State government, excluding education and hospitals	\$69,900
Outpatient care centers	\$51,270
Offices of other health practitioners	\$49,190
Individual and family services	\$44,760

Marriage and family therapists generally work full time. Some therapists work evenings and weekends to accommodate their clients' schedules.

Marriage and family therapists may receive paid vacations, holidays, and sick days; life and health insurance; and retirement benefits. These benefits are usually paid by the employer. Self-employed marriage and family therapists pay for any benefits themselves.

EMPLOYMENT AND OUTLOOK

There were about 55,300 marriage and family therapists employed nationally in 2018. Employment of marriage and family therapists is projected to grow 22 percent from 2018 to 2028, much faster than the average for all occupations. Growth is expected due to the increasing use of integrated care, which is a treatment of multiple problems at one time by a group of specialists. In providing integrated care, marriage and family therapists are working with counselors such as substance abuse, behavior disorder, or mental health counselors to address patients' issues as a team.

Related Occupations

- Clergy
- Educational Therapist
- Forensic Scientist
- Psychologist
- Rehabilitation Worker
- Religious Worker
- Social and Human Services Assistant
- Social Worker
- Substance Abuse Therapist
- Vocational Rehabilitation Therapist

Conversation With . . .
NANCY KNUDSEN, MED, LMFT

Director, Couple and Family Institute of New England
Northampton, Massachusetts
Therapist, 32 years

1. What was your individual career path in terms of education/training, entry-level job or other significant opportunity?

I was always very interested in people and what makes people tick. When I was an undergraduate at Wellesley College, I took courses in psychology, sociology, and anthropology to learn about human nature and the impact of culture. After college, I ended up getting married and having a child before I had fully figured out my career path. It was three years later when my short-lived marriage ended in divorce that I decided to further my education and pursue becoming a therapist. I started my studies at the Counseling and Consulting Psychology program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1983 intending to become a child therapist so that I could help children like mine deal with the difficulties of divorce. But when I took my first course in family therapy, I realized that the most effective way to help children would be to work with their parents.

After graduate school, I attended the Kantor Family Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for two years to complete the credentials for becoming a licensed marriage and family therapist.

My first jobs were working at community mental health centers where I was exposed to families of all different backgrounds. Since I spoke Spanish, I was assigned many Puerto Rican and Central American families. Agency work is difficult because the clients often have histories of trauma, oppression, and mental illness. I think of agency work as the boot camp of the profession where one learns on the job how to work with all kinds of people and situations.

After spending over ten years in community mental health, I gradually worked my way into starting my own private practice. Today, I specialize in couple therapy, but I still see some families as well.

2. What are the most important skills and/or qualities for someone in your profession?

It's important to be able to tolerate and work with people who are in active conflict. Marriage and family therapists have to be able to view situations from multiple perspectives, without making anybody in the room "the bad guy."

People often come to therapy with the goal of changing somebody other than themselves. They look to the therapist to side with them. The therapist has to look beyond the immediate conflict to see patterns of behavior between people.

Couples are initially drawn to each other because of their compatibilities, but they inevitably hit up against areas of difference. How people deal with these differences and the conflict that comes with it is a critical piece of the therapy work.

3. What do you wish you had known going into this profession?

I did not know how ill equipped I was at that time to deal with being in the midst of emotional upset. I think I came into the field with the naïve idea that I would be able to calmly talk people down from their most raw emotions. I did not yet have the skills or self-knowledge necessary to be a master therapist, but that can only come with time, good training, and experience.

4. Are there many job opportunities in your profession? In what specific areas?

It's a field that continues to grow. There is a scarcity of well-trained couple and family therapists. New models of couple and family therapy continue to emerge in the field and therapists who get these specialty trainings are highly sought after.

5. How do you see the profession changing in the next five years? How will technology impact that change and what skills will be required?

In the future, marriage and family therapy is going to increasingly be part of behavioral health services offered by hospitals and medical facilities. It will be part of a team approach.

In terms of technology, online therapy is a growing field. I have colleagues who do online therapy with couples all over the world. As the technology improves, I suspect it will be easier to do effective couples therapy online. For the time being, I prefer to see people in person.

6. What do you enjoy most about your job? What do you like least about your job?

I find exploring human relationships immensely satisfying. It feels like an honor to be so close to people's intimate struggles and to help them find greater harmony and bond more deeply with family members. By the end of their time in therapy, they often feel closer than they have in years.

What I like least about the profession is how much sitting it involves. Paperwork and insurance forms are also not my favorite.

To avoid burnout and to keep myself fresh, I like to keep learning new approaches. In recent years, I've become a specialist in a therapy model called emotionally focused therapy which helps couples build secure and lasting bonds. I supervise and teach other therapists to give back and keep my enthusiasm for the profession alive. I have also served as president of the Massachusetts Association of Marriage and Family Therapy.

7. Can you suggest a valuable “try this” for students considering a career in your profession?

Take courses in human development, sociology of the family, psychology and cross-cultural types of courses. Many high schools and colleges offer these types of courses.

Join a peer counseling program at your high school. Find out if helping people with their problems is something you're drawn to.

MORE INFORMATION

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

112 S. Alfred Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-3061
703.838.9808
www.aamft.org

Minority Fellowship Program for graduate students:

www.aamft.org/imis15/Content/MFP/MFP_Program.aspx

American Counseling Association

5999 Stevenson Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22304
800.347.6647
www.counseling.org

ACA Foundation's Annual Graduate Student Scholarship Competitions:
www.counseling.org/Students/

List of State Professional Therapist Licensure Boards:

www.counseling.org/Therapists/LicensureAndCert/TP/StateRequirements/CT2.aspx

National Board for Certified Therapists

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