

Consumer Information

What You Should Know About Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists and Their Services

What is marriage and family therapy?

Marriage and family therapy is the assessment and treatment of affective, cognitive or behavioral disorders that disrupt interpersonal family relationships, including marital/couple, parent-child, pre-marital and other relationships.

Practitioners, called **marriage and family therapists**, are trained in individual psychotherapy and family systems to assess and treat mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders, and address an array of relationship issues within the context of marital/couple, family and various relational systems.

What services do licensed marriage and family therapists provide?

Marriage and family therapists provide individual, couple, family, relational and group therapy. They assess, treat and implement change in the overall, long-term well-being of individuals, couples, families and those in other relationships. The traditional emphasis on the individual is expanded to include consideration of the nature and roles of individuals in relation to others, particularly in the family system.

Marriage and family therapy focuses not only on the individual patient—even if it is a single person seeking therapy—but on the context and relationships in which the person participates. All relationship contexts are considered, including the married or committed couple, family, school, work, social, community and other relational systems.

Marriage and family therapists treat a wide range of clinical problems including: depression, marital problems, anxiety, nervous and mental disorders, as well as relationship, couple, family and child-parent problems. Marriage and family therapy is often brief and solution-focused and it is designed to achieve specific therapeutic goals of individuals and families.

How do licensees provide these services?

A marriage and family therapist uses assessment instruments and mental health counseling and psychotherapy to identify and evaluate the patterns of interactions in the relationships of the patient(s) for the purpose of providing appropriate marriage and family therapy services. Marriage and family therapists work with individuals, children/teens and parents, couples and families in a variety of settings to reduce challenges to healthy functioning.

While therapeutic activities vary according to the needs of the patient, the following are examples of marriage and family therapy:

- Assess and evaluate affective, behavioral, and cognitive disorders that cause unhealthy functioning or distress in families
- Provide pre-marital and/or relationship counseling to all types of committed couples
- Help children, teenagers and parents to improve communication and to reduce challenges to healthy functioning in their relationship and interactions
- Help patients identify goals and solutions specific to the problems that are causing emotional distress
- Facilitate collaboration of the marriage and family therapist, patient(s) and other networks in which the patient(s) are involved to create a multidisciplinary treatment team

Where do licensed marriage and family therapists practice?

Marriage and family therapists provide services as solo practitioners or with other marriage and family therapists. They may also work as part of a team that includes other licensed health care and mental health providers that work together to determine and implement a program to address the patient's needs in various settings that are authorized to provide professional services.

In cases of sustained treatment of a serious mental illness (schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism), the patient must be evaluated by a physician. The marriage and family therapist must consult with the physician regarding the illness, and the physician must advise whether any medical care is needed.

What credentials do licensed marriage and family therapists have?

These professionals train in both family systems and psychotherapy. Other than those marriage and family therapists licensed under the special provisions established in law for those already practicing when the new law

came into effect, each New Jersey licensed practitioner has a master's or higher degree in marriage and family therapy or its equivalent, with required coursework in marriage and family theory and practice, assessment, ethical practice and a supervised internship, has passed a State-approved exam, and has completed at least 3,500 client contact hours of clinical experience under supervision of a qualified, licensed mental health professional. Those licensed under the special provisions for those practicing when the licensing law took effect meet other standards specified in law and regulation.

Individuals who have completed their education requirements may hold a *limited permit* to practice the profession while they work to complete the exam and/or experience required for full licensure. These individuals practice **under supervision** at a specific site.

Who may practice marriage and family therapy?

Only licensed marriage and family therapists, and certain others exempt under the licensing law, may practice the profession. None of these exempt individuals, however, may use the *title* of **licensed marriage and family therapist, licensed marriage therapist** or **licensed family therapist** unless they are also licensed in marriage and family therapy.

Are licensed marriage and family therapists allowed to prescribe drugs or perform "invasive" treatments?

No, these professionals may not prescribe or administer drugs or use any invasive procedure. Examples of "invasive procedures" include surgery, therapeutic ultrasound, and electroconvulsive therapy.

Will my health insurance cover the services provided by a licensed marriage and family therapist?

To determine whether marriage and family therapy or psychotherapy services provided by a licensed marriage and family therapist are covered by insurance, review your plan's benefits with your insurance provider.

What records does a licensed marriage and family therapist retain?

Your patient records typically contain your full case history. The therapist must keep these records for 6 years or until the patient turns 22, whichever is longer. Although there are exceptions, your records are generally confidential, unless you approve their release. Ask your therapist about any exceptions. If you want a copy of your records, provide your therapist with a

written request. You may be charged a reasonable fee to offset the cost of providing copies.

What questions should individuals with disabilities ask about accessing services?

Ask such questions as whether the service location is physically accessible (curb cuts, ramps, restrooms, etc.), as well as whether there is a Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD), parking for people with disabilities or homebound care.

How can I locate a licensed marriage and family therapist?

When seeking help, consider the types of available therapies and ask if the practitioner has been trained specifically in the therapy being practiced.

- check with people you know for recommendations
- your primary care provider may be able to direct you to a marriage and family therapist
- professional marriage and family therapy organizations may have a list of members and their specialties
- the yellow pages of your telephone book may include a listing of "marriage and family therapists" or "psychotherapists"

The State Board for Mental Health Practitioners **cannot** direct you to a marriage and family therapist.

Verifying a New Jersey license:

New Jersey licensed marriage and family therapists must display a current New York registration certificate; this certificate lists the professional's name, address, and dates of the registration period. Licensed marriage and family therapists must reregister every three years to practice in New York. Some professionals also display their original New York license, diploma, licenses from other states, and membership certificates. You may [verify](#) an individual's license and registration on this site.