

# Psychologists: What to Expect



## 1. What qualifications does one need to have to be designated as a psychologist in Ontario?

It all depends on the type of registration, because in Ontario, you can register as a psychologist or psychological associate. To become a registered psychologist with the College of Psychologists of Ontario, you must complete a Master's degree and Ph.D. in psychology, in addition to one year working under supervised practice. After completion of your supervised practice year, applicants must complete three comprehensive exams. To become registered as a psychological associate, the process is the same, but instead of completing a Ph.D., they work under supervision for approximately 4 years before embarking on their supervised practice year and completion of the comprehensive exams. These are the base requirements for registration and do not account for any additional specialized training with various populations (e.g. autism), assessment tools, or therapy approaches.



## 2. What is a psychometrist?

Psychometrists typically have a Bachelor's or Master's degree relevant to psychology and have participated in comprehensive training in order to administer psychological tests. They will likely be present for most of your face-to-face contact. Essentially, they support the psychologist or psychological associate with intakes, administration of psychological tests, and with report writing. It is important to note that, whereas a psychometrist acts as a support to the psychologist/psychological associate, all clinical impressions and diagnoses should come directly from the psychologist or psychological associate.

## 3. What is the role of a psychologist in supporting someone with autism?

Psychologists can play multiple roles, depending on their expertise and employment position. Overall, psychologists specialize in mental health; they study how people think, feel, and behave. They apply their knowledge of people to understand, explain, predict, and change behaviour. Psychologists can be registered in either clinical, counselling, school, forensic, organizational/industrial, health, rehabilitation, neuropsychology, or sports psychology and can practice in a clinical practice, conduct research, teach in college or university, and participate in policy development. Psychologists are registered health professionals who can

perform the controlled acts of diagnosis and psychotherapy.

When working with people on the spectrum, the focus of psychotherapy is on secondary issues: not to “change” the person’s autism, but to support them with coping and adapting to the demands of daily life. The type or approach to therapy often depends on the individual and the presence of any secondary disabilities; those who can engage in reciprocal conversations and answer open-ended questions may benefit from more “talk therapy”, whereas those with more severe impairments may benefit from focusing on the behavioural and experiential components of therapy. Thus far, there is research support for the use of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), group social skills programs, and mindfulness as therapy approaches. It is important to note that not all psychologists/psychological associates have expertise working with individuals on the spectrum, so it is important that you find a highly skilled clinician who will tailor their approach to your/ your child’s unique strengths and weaknesses.

Depending on areas of expertise, psychologists/psychological associates may also offer behaviour consultation, parenting support, disability counseling, training and coaching, support for siblings, family therapy, workshops, presentations, and community outreach.

#### **4. What is the difference between a psychologist, a psychiatrist, and a psychotherapist?**

**Psychologist:** This professional has a PhD in psychology. In addition to performing talk therapy, they have training in psychological testing and diagnostic assessments. Their fees are not covered by OHIP, and they cannot prescribe medication. In Ontario, psychologists must be registered with the College of Psychologists of Ontario.

**Psychiatrist:** This professional group has a medical degree and specialty training in psychiatry and, unlike most psychotherapists, can prescribe medication. While psychiatrists are trained in psychotherapy, their focus is on the biological aspects of mental health. They typically see patients for diagnostic assessment and treatment recommendations. As medical doctors, they are OHIP-covered.

**Psychotherapist:** This is an umbrella term for any professional who is trained in the assessment and treatment of cognitive, emotional or behavioural disturbances by psychotherapeutic means, delivered through a therapeutic relationship based primarily on verbal or non-verbal communication.

Psychotherapists cannot provide diagnoses or prescribe medication. They also cannot use the Doctor or Dr. Title in a clinical setting. In Ontario, psychotherapists must be registered with the College of Registered Psychotherapists in Ontario.

#### **5. Do I need a referral to see a psychologist?**

Referrals are not required to receive psychological services because they are not covered under OHIP. However, if you are using private insurance benefits to cover costs, your insurer may require a referral from a physician. While a referral might not be required, it

can be helpful to discuss your concerns with your physician, as they may have recommendations regarding which clinician would be best suited to support you and your family.

## **6. Why might an autistic person need to see a psychologist?**

Psychologists and psychological associates support many people and their families regarding a variety of concerns or problems. Many psychology clients may not have a formal diagnosis but are having a difficult time coping or adjusting. Psychologists can also support clients who are seeking a diagnosis or who have a diagnosis and are looking for therapy or other interventions. Regardless of whether you have a diagnosis or not, if the concerns or problems are impacting daily life (e.g. social, family, school, employment, etc.), then consultation may be warranted.

Autistic people often find access to psychological services especially beneficial because the co-occurrence of psychological disorders in autism can range from 10% (CDC, 2014) to as high as 70% (APA, 2013; Leyfer et al., 2006), including Anxiety, Depression, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Specific Phobias, learning problems, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, and oppositional behaviours. Autistic people are also vulnerable to experiencing problems with language, social skills, and executive functioning (e.g., planning, self-monitoring, working memory, and self-regulation).

## **7. How will a psychologist work with me and/or my child?**

If the client is school-aged, you will typically either work with a clinical and/or school psychologist or psychological associate. Clinical psychologists/psychological associates focus on the assessment and treatment of psychological difficulties; the clinician conducts psychological assessments to determine if a diagnosis is warranted and can develop treatment plans and provide therapy or various other interventions. A school psychologist/psychological associate supports a student's ability to learn, with a focus on the assessment of learning, behaviour, and social-emotional functioning. Some may develop treatment or accommodation plans to support learning.

For those seeking treatment, the psychologist can provide psychotherapy, which is a “talk-based” approach to intervention that is used to support and maintain mental health and well-being. Psychotherapy can be offered individually or in a group format to support alterations in mood, anxiety, adjustment, trauma, grief, interpersonal conflicts, attention difficulties, challenging behaviours, etc. Depending on the age of the client, psychologists may work primarily with them, solely with the parents or caregivers, or a combination of both. Essential components of psychotherapy include developing a strong therapeutic relationship, ensuring engagement in sessions, caregiver involvement (as required), and goal setting. In psychotherapy sessions, we talk about the challenges the client is experiencing, help to process the problem and interpret it in a different way, help to recognize and modify unhelpful thinking and behaviour patterns, and support in learning new coping skills and compensatory and prevention strategies. Psychotherapy sessions also help with improving

communication with others and overall problem-solving.

## **8. How often should I/my child see a psychologist?**

This can vary, depending on the service you are seeking. If participating in an assessment, psychologists usually do not re-assess people until at least 1-2 years have passed since their last assessment. Clients are seen for their initial assessment and then again once symptoms have significantly changed or if they require an updated assessment for service qualification (e.g. for Developmental Services Ontario). If participating in psychotherapy, clients usually start on a weekly or biweekly schedule, which can be faded to monthly sessions. After participating in a course of therapy, it is not unusual to participate in follow-up/booster sessions in the future, similar to seeing your family physician for a yearly check-up.

## **9. Many autistic people experience sensory challenges; how can a psychologist accommodate this during an appointment?**

Knowing which specific sensory challenges exist in advance is helpful. For example, if noise is a concern, any music playing in the office would be turned down or off during the visit. Lighting can also be dimmed. If perfumes or other scents are a concern, they would be eliminated as much as possible during the visit. If the patient has a comfort object/toy, they are sometimes encouraged to bring it with them.

## **10. Can a psychologist work with other professionals in supporting autistic people?**

Most definitely. A psychologist can play a variety of roles on a treatment team and can support the team by looking at development, cognition, emotions, adaptive skills, attachment and family, exposure to adverse experiences or trauma, academics, etc. The role of the psychologist is to provide clinical insight about someone's profile of strengths and challenges to support the rest of the team in their treatment planning.

## **11. What is the typical fee for a psychologist? Is there funding available?**

The recommended hourly rate for a psychologist/psychological associate in private practice, as per the Ontario Psychological Association, is \$225, which reflects not only the face-to-face contact, but also the costs associated with treatment planning, writing session notes, office space, staff salaries, and other business overheads. Financial assistance can be available through extended or private health insurance plans (average coverage for psychology varies from \$300 to \$1000 per year), Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), etc. The funding you receive through the current Ontario Autism Program (OAP) may cover some services, depending on the expertise of the clinician.

**DISCLAIMER:** This document reflects the views of the author. It is Autism Ontario's intent to inform and educate.

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