Clinical psychology is a specific branch of the scientific discipline of psychology. It is considered the largest subfield and has the largest number of practitioners today. Clinical psychology deals with integrating science, theory and clinical knowledge to understand, prevent and relieve psychologically based stress or dysfunction. Additionally, clinical psychology tries to promote well-being and personal development. Clinical psychologists use many different types of psychological assessments and psychotherapy to assist their patients. Despite the specification of “clinical” many clinical psychologists also spend a lot of time engaged in research, teaching, consultation, forensic testimony and program development.

History

The first psychological clinic was opened at the University of Pennsylvania by Lightner Witmer. Witmer was a student of the Witmer Wundt, largely considered the father of modern psychology. Up until Witmer’s psychological clinic at the University of Pennsylvania, there was very little application of this new field of psychology. Prior to 1879 there were attempts at assessing and treating mental distress but this usually fell under the purview of religious authorities and figures. As time moved forward, mental processes came under more direct scientific inquiry. In the early 19th century an individual could literally have his or her head examined, a process known as phrenology. It consisted of analyzing the shape of the skull to determine personality.

Obviously, there was room for more rigorous scientific application of the mental health field. Witmer’s first case was helping a young boy who had trouble with spelling. He was successfully treated and lead to Witmer opening his psychological clinic in 1896. It was dedicated to helping children with learning disabilities and ten years later Witmer founded the first journal of clinical psychology, called “The Psychological Clinic.”

Clinical psychology continued to grow but the issues of serious mental problems remained the domain of psychiatrists and neurologists. What clinical psychologists were called upon to do, however, was develop psychological assessments for the United States army during World War I. This solidified the role of clinical psychology as one of psychological assessment and not treatment for another forty years.

Once again, a world war provided the opportunity for clinical psychology to grow. With World War II raging on, the military realized that many soldiers were coming home with acute psychological trauma. The term was labeled “shell shock” and clinical psychologists began helping soldiers overcome this debilitating disability.

Modern Clinical Psychology

Clinical psychology has continued to expand its treatment role in addition to its specialty of
What Is Clinical Psychology?

Written by Eleanor Montgomery
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psychological assessment. From 1974 to 1990 it is estimated that the number of practicing clinical psychologists increased from 20,000 to 63,000. Part of this growth is due to the increased awareness of the importance of mental health and its links to physical wellbeing.

Today, clinical psychologists offer a huge range of professional services including, conducting psychological research, consultation with schools and businesses, development of prevention and treatment programs, teaching, and providing expert testimony.

Clinical Psychology Education

In the United States, becoming a clinical psychologist requires a doctorate in psychology and additional training in clinical settings. Generally, clinical psychologists spend between four and six years in graduate school after earning a bachelor’s degree. There are two different types of degrees available in clinical psychology. The more commonly known Ph.D is usually centered on research while the newer Psy.D is more practice-oriented.

Clinical psychologists work in a variety of settings, including private therapeutic settings, universities, hospitals, and other private and public places. Clinical psychology requires a very high investment in time and energy and is characterized by individuals who handle stress and conflict well, work well with people, and are able to think creatively. Clinical psychologists often have direct and observable positive benefits for people who needs help and therefore can be a very rewarding career.