



ESSENTIALS OF THE Clinical Mental Health Counseling Profession

Including the Key Documents of the Profession
and a Career Development Guide



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and a Career Development Guide

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AMERICAN MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS ASSOCIATION

Alexandria, Virginia

CITATION GUIDE

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The American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA)—is committed to advancing the profession of clinical mental health counseling and improving public health. The association provides professional development, educational publications, continuing education and training career guidance, standards of practice, research, advocacy, a code of ethics, and other resources. For more information, visit www.ambca.org.

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Dedicated to all those who have contributed to the profession of clinical mental health counseling.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction and Executive Summary	1
SECTION 1: The Profession of Clinical Mental Health Counseling	9
Chapter 1: What Distinguishes Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors From Other Mental Health Professionals?	11
Chapter 2: The Fundamental Documents of the Profession	15
Chapter 3: Career Guidance and the Phases of Clinical Mental Health Counseling Professional Development	23
Chapter 4: The History of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Profession	41
Chapter 5: The Future of the Profession	51
SECTION 2: Professional Associations Related to Clinical Mental Health Counseling	61
Chapter 6: The Organization of the American Mental Health Counselors Association	63
Chapter 7: Other Organizations and Associations Related to Counseling	71
APPENDIXES	77
A. AMHCA's Mission and Vision	79
B. <i>AMHCA Standards for the Practice of Clinical Mental Health Counseling</i>	81
C. <i>AMHCA Code of Ethics</i>	121
D. <i>AMHCA Statement on Reparative or Conversion Therapy</i>	141
E. <i>AMHCA Clinical Supervision Disclosure Template</i>	143
F. <i>The AMHCA Ethical Decision-Making Model</i>	147
G. <i>The Clinical Mental Health Counselor Declaration: A Hippocratic Pledge</i>	149
End Note	151



Introduction and Executive Summary

The Impact of the Profession

“Deep in their roots, all flowers keep the light.”

Theodore Roethke

Why is the profession of clinical mental health counseling crucial to the future of public health?

The clinical mental health counseling profession critically affects public health in the United States. Members of the profession are at the forefront of the integration of psychological wellness and holistic health. Increasingly, health care includes attention to physical health and related emotional concerns. Clinical mental health counseling is a profession of licensed specialists trained to work with individuals, couples, families, and communities to resolve complex mental disorders while promoting greater mental health and vitality. For members of the profession, “It’s not just about getting better—it’s about creating a better life.”

Clinical Mental Health Counselors

“Essentials of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Profession” is published by American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA). “Essentials” defines this unique profession, explains its distinctive characteristics, assembles a number of the profession’s fundamental documents, and provides career development guidance.

AMHCA recognizes trained clinical mental health counselor practitioners in the following categories:

- ❑ Clinical Mental Health Counseling Student (CMHC Student)—A student in a master’s or doctoral educational program who provides supervised clinical mental health counseling services during internships
- ❑ Supervised Clinical Mental Health Counselor (Supervised CMHC)—A graduate of a graduate degree program who provides clinical mental health counseling services, but who is not licensed to practice without supervision
- ❑ Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor (LCMHC)—One who is licensed to provide clinical mental health counseling services independently, without supervision

Unless otherwise specified in this book, the acronym LCMHC is an umbrella term that also includes CMHC Students and Supervised CMHCs, both of whom provide supervised clinical mental health services. Clinical mental health counselors in all of the above categories assess or diagnose and treat mental disorders specified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–5)* of the American Psychiatric Association.

State titles for LCMHCs vary from one state to another because of licensing laws. State titles include Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC), Licensed Clinical Counselor (LCC), etc. The LCMHC acronym applies to all clinical mental health counselors irrespective of their state title. Likewise, the LCMHC acronym applies regardless of the title of the individual’s graduate education program. For example, LCMHCs may graduate from master’s degree programs in Mental Health Counseling, Applied Psychology, or other related programs.

Distinctive Characteristics of the Profession

Those who are trained and licensed as LCMHCs possess distinguishing professional attributes. Although licensed under different state titles (e.g., Licensed Professional Counselor, Licensed Mental Health Counselor, etc.), the members of the clinical mental health counseling profession subscribe to the following:

- ❑ *Licensed to diagnose.* LCMHCs are licensed in each state to diagnose and treat mental disorders. Along with other mental health professionals, they are Primary Mental Health Care Providers who offer psychotherapy and other services for the betterment of mental and emotional well-being. Distinctively, LCMHCs focus on the total health of individuals and the growth of interpersonal relationships. This includes symptom alleviation of mental disorders while attending to the underlying causes. LCMHCs employ evidence-based, therapeutic treatment approaches that are encompassing in scope, preventive in design, and developmental in nature.
- ❑ *Holistic health focus.* Because of their holistic health integration and evidence-based treatment, LCMHCs are skilled and knowledgeable clinicians. They employ evidence-based psychotherapeutic methods and therapies such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. However, LCMHCs offer a range of other services, including vocational counseling, support of integrative behavioral health, couples and family counseling, etc.
- ❑ *Collaborative partnering.* Effective clinical mental health counseling integrates a collaborative effort with the client or patient and other stakeholders (such as family members, primary care providers, and policymakers). As a part of their graduate training, LCMHCs are taught to respond to cultural diversity. These mental health professionals also use the skills of leadership, advocacy, and collaboration to promote systemic changes for improved public health.

Individuals, families, communities, and our nation need effective treatment of mental health conditions along with integrated health. AMHCA, which was created in 1976 to advance the profession of clinical mental health counseling, promotes the preparation, training, and credentialing of LCMHCs. In addition, AMHCA publicly advocates for greater mental, emotional, and physiological well-being for all people.

AMHCA created this guide about the clinical mental health counseling profession to illustrate the particular benefits LCMHCs provide. Each of the other three mental health professions (Psychologists, Clinical Social Workers, and Marriage and Family Therapists) offers distinctive services, with some overlap among them. LCMHCs are distinguished by their ability to address the causes as well as the symptoms of depression, anxiety, trauma, substance use, and other mental disorders. LCMHCs effectively help individuals, families, and communities achieve richer, more fulfilling lives. Working to systematically enhance health integration, LCMHCs are on the forefront of behavioral health initiatives. The work LCMHCs do helps meet the need for effective treatment of mental health conditions along with the desirability of integrated health—a growing need that is recognized by individuals, families, communities, and our nation.

For a brief video that highlights the distinctive characteristics of Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors, please see www.ambca.org/about/about-us.

The Profession of Clinical Mental Health Counseling

Dedicated to the mental and emotional well-being of all individuals, the profession of clinical mental health counseling is composed of Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors (LCMHCs). LCMHCs are state-accredited to assess, diagnose, and treat mental disorders defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* that is published by the American Psychiatric Association. However, state license titles for LCMHCs vary; they include Licensed Professional Counselors, Licensed Mental Health Counselors, Licensed Clinical Counselors, Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors, and other licensed designations. Regardless of license title, LCMHCs are mental health professionals recognized in all states to comprehensively treat psychological disorders and many quality-of-life challenges.

Because LCMHCs focus on mental health, they collaborate with their clients using evidence-based therapeutic approaches. They are qualified by graduate education, supervised experience, and state licensing to treat depression, anxiety, trauma, substance use behaviors, and other psychological concerns. In addition,

LCMHCs are holistically trained to address social, cultural, vocational, educational, integrated behavioral health, and physical wellness.

Members of the public, insurers, employers, federal and state agencies, and other stakeholders need information about the clinically skilled capabilities of LCMHCs. As mental health professionals, LCMHCs are rigorously qualified to provide a wide spectrum of services. To address this need for information, the American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA) created, “Essentials of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Profession” (“Essentials”). The book provides the framework for understanding the profession of clinical mental health counseling as well as the career development of LCMHCs. “Essentials” outlines the distinguishing training of LCMHCs and the applied skills they have to treat mental disorders in conjunction with other co-occurring conditions. It includes standards of training for graduate studies and postgraduate degree education, the *AMHCA Code of Ethics*, *The Clinical Mental Health Counselor Declaration: a Hippocratic Pledge*, advanced practice certifications for clinical specialists in one or more specializations, and other distinctive components of the profession.

In addition, “Essentials” includes several foundational documents of the clinical mental health counseling profession. These documents serve as a library of resources for all members of the profession as they advance from graduate studies through the progressive stages of their careers. “Essentials” also provides step-by-step qualification requirements that recognize professional development. For example, in addition to achieving recognition as a clinical specialist, LCMHCs can achieve AMHCA professional recognition through AMHCA’s credentials and its advanced clinical practice board certifications, which are described in Chapter 3.

Purposes of “Essentials of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Profession”

“Essentials” outlines all of the key components of the clinical mental health counseling profession and provides a unified vision for improving individual, family, and community well-being. AMHCA created “Essentials” to:

- ❑ Provide career guidance to all individuals who have chosen to become licensed in clinical mental health counseling.
- ❑ Offer information for those who may consider a vocation in clinical mental health counseling.
- ❑ Inform members of the public about the profession of clinical mental health counseling.
- ❑ Explain the distinctive characteristics of the profession to those in government, health services, and other allied associations, organizations, and stakeholders.

LCMHCs are engaged in a demanding vocation devoted to enhanced mental and emotional well-being, improved relationships, physical wellness, and enriched quality of life. This guide serves as a source document that describes the values of the profession as well as the characteristics that differentiate LCMHCs from those who practice in other mental health professions.

Components of “Essentials”

A complete understanding of the profession requires a foundation of knowledge about what it means to be engaged as a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor. “Essentials” provides an overview for LCMHCs to gain a greater appreciation for the vocation they have chosen.

“Essentials” is organized into two main sections, with summaries of each chapter listed below:

❑ SECTION 1: The Profession of Clinical Mental Health Counseling

- Chapter 1: What Distinguishes Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors From Other Mental Health Professionals? *LCMHCs are unique as Primary Mental Health Care Providers. These skilled and knowledgeable mental health professionals offer psychotherapy as well as a range of other supportive resources unique to the profession. These attributes are explained to enable members of the profession and the public to more fully appreciate the qualifications of LCMHCs.*
- Chapter 2: The Fundamental Documents of the Profession: *These include The Clinical Mental Health Counselor Declaration: A Hippocratic Pledge, AMHCA Standards for the Practice of Clinical Mental Health Counseling, and AMHCA Code of Ethics. In addition, AMHCA publishes two primary publications in support of these fundamental documents: Journal of Clinical Mental Health Counseling (JMHC) and The Advocate Magazine.*
- Chapter 3: Career Guidance and the Phases of Professional Development for Clinical Mental Health Counselors: *This chapter outlines each step of LCMHC professional development. Those considering the profession or who have enrolled in a graduate degree program in clinical mental health counseling will find a comprehensive roadmap of career progression especially pertinent. The career phases and the associated qualifications detailed in this chapter are compatible with, but do not supplant, any state's licensing requirements. Nevertheless, the qualifications of each career phase do confirm and recognize the individual's knowledge and understanding of the clinical mental health counseling profession.*
- Chapter 4: History of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Profession: *The profession has passed a number of crucial milestones, including recognized licensing in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Understanding this history is crucial for LCMHCs to grasp the foundations of the profession. With this historical context, they can contribute more knowledgeably to present and future clinical mental health counseling initiatives.*
- Chapter 5: The Future of the Profession: *With an emphasis on integrated behavioral health, Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors are distinctively positioned to have an increasing influence in the future of mental and emotional well-being. By virtue of their education and ongoing training throughout their careers, LCMHCs continue to impact individuals, families, and communities. Additionally, the members of AMHCA's board of directors and the AMHCA staff consistently look for ways to anticipate and address future concerns and opportunities for the profession. In this chapter, a number of public health issues are identified. As part of its mission, the profession addresses these and other concerns to improve overall health and well-being.*

❑ SECTION 2: Professional Associations Related to Clinical Mental Health Counseling

- Chapter 6: The American Mental Health Counselors Association: *AMHCA is the association for the profession of clinical mental health counseling and for all LCMHCs. This chapter concisely describes the roles of the AMHCA board of directors and officers and the committees of the association; the responsibilities of the executive director/CEO; and the functions of the staff.*
- Chapter 7: Other Organizations and Associations Related to Counseling: *It is worthwhile to understand the key groups and alliances related to AMHCA and the other mental health professions. AMHCA and its state chapters often have opportunities to coordinate and work together with these other organizations and associations regarding issues of mutual interest.*

□ Appendixes:

- Appendix A: AMHCA's Mission and Vision Statements
- Appendix B: *AMHCA Standards for the Practice of Clinical Mental Health Counseling: These standards of practice provide a guide to the breadth and depth of clinical mental health counseling. They include the knowledge and skills of each area of specialized focus within the profession. AMHCA Standards was first published in 1979, three years after AMHCA was established, and is continuously updated to reflect the latest scientific advancements in psychology, neuroscience, supervision standards, and evidence-based treatment modalities.*
- Appendix C: *AMHCA Code of Ethics: Because it is written specifically for LCMHCs as well as CMHC Students and Supervised CMHCs, the AMHCA Code of Ethics addresses concerns pertaining to the practice of clinical mental health counseling. Members of the profession should adhere to the AMHCA Code of Ethics, regardless of other codes of ethics that may be applicable to them. The Code of Ethics is updated as needed to discuss issues of vital importance to the public, legislative bodies, and other interested parties.*
- Appendix D: *AMHCA Statement on Reparative or Conversion Therapy: In 2014, the AMHCA board of directors issued a formal statement regarding reparative or conversion therapy. These types of therapeutic approaches are not considered ethically valid.*
- Appendix E: *AMHCA Clinical Supervision Disclosure Template: LCMHCs who are supervisors should consider specific ethical questions. The AMHCA Clinical Supervision Disclosure Template provides a model for supervision.*
- Appendix F: *The AMHCA Ethical Decision-Making Model: Having a systematic approach is helpful when considering ethical concerns. The AMHCA Ethical Decision-Making Model is a valid means of addressing these issues.*
- Appendix G: *The Clinical Mental Health Declaration: A Hippocratic Pledge*

The Necessity for the Profession of Clinical Mental Health Counseling

Studies show that people need access to mental health professionals to resolve a wide variety of mental disorders and other emotional concerns. Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors are increasingly playing a vital role in the wellness of communities and in the interests of the nation's health because they are Primary Mental Health Care Providers with a focus on integrated behavioral health.

"Essentials" illustrates how LCMHCs can be highly effective in the treatment of psychological concerns. While psychiatry, neuroscience, and psychopharmacology have contributed to improved conditions for many patients, LCMHCs, as qualified psychotherapy specialists, have immense impact in actually resolving the underlying causes of disorder symptoms. By resolving these underlying causes, LCMHCs positively impact the growing concerns about substance use and opioids, the swelling rates of PTSD diagnoses, the impact on families, the burden that untreated mental disorders place on medical resources, and other behavioral health issues. Even in the context of depression and anxiety, prescribed psychotropic medications help to lessen symptoms, but they cannot be depended on to address the underlying causes.

More and more, successful resolution of mental health disorders depends on effective, evidence-based clinical mental health counseling. LCMHCs are trained to use a range of treatment modalities including psychotherapeutic interventions, couples and family counseling, substance use and co-occurring disorders treatment, vocational rehabilitation, group counseling work, etc. In addition to being trained to work in concert with medical specialists, including primary care physicians, they are positioned to participate on

integrated treatment teams. With their education in neuroscience and psychotropic medications, their breadth of academic, developmental, and clinical knowledge makes them particularly effective integrated behavioral health practitioners.

Their focused education on clinical mental health treatment—along with their training, applied skills, and holistic health perspective—puts LCMHCs on the leading edge of treatment effectiveness as Primary Mental Health Care Providers. As the public’s awareness of their abilities and their professional skills grows, they will be sought out even more to provide successful and enduring patient outcomes.

“Essentials of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Profession” is a living document that AMHCA will update regularly. Readers are encouraged to contribute their ideas for future updates by using the comment box on the “Essentials” page at www.ambca.org/publications/essentials.

If you'd like to gain a greater understanding of the clinical mental health counseling profession, read this book.

- ✓ Why the profession of clinical mental health counseling is crucial to public health (Introduction)
- ✓ What distinguishes Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors (LCMHCs) from other mental health professionals (Chapter 1)
- ✓ Why *The Clinical Mental Health Counselor Declaration* and the *AMHCA Code of Ethics* are critical to LCMHCs (Chapter 2)
- ✓ How credentialing and board certification are crucial to the development of a dynamic career in clinical mental health counseling (Chapter 3)
- ✓ How, since 1976, the profession has been shaped by its history (Chapter 4)
- ✓ Why the future of the profession is at the forefront of behavioral health and Primary Mental Health Care (Chapter 5)
- ✓ How the American Mental Health Counselors Association is structured to advance the profession (Chapter 6)

An exclusive outlook: "Essentials of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Profession" offers an inside view of a profession that makes a unique impact on improving wellness and well-being. With the public's growing awareness that physical wellness is integrated with mental and emotional well-being, Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors are distinctly effective in contributing to overall health.

LCMHCs are licensed to diagnose and treat mental disorders. They resolve depression, anxiety, trauma, substance use and other compulsive behaviors, and other psychological conditions. Because of their holistic view of individuals and families, these mental health professionals offer evidence-based approaches to achieve greater levels of resilience and life satisfaction.

For Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselors,
"It's not just about getting better—it's about creating a better life."



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