BeWell Corp.

Psychologist vs psychiatrist: who should I see?

Information for clients



Psychologists and psychiatrists both assess and treat mental health concerns, and people often assume they are interchangeable. They are not, and the difference comes down to training. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who has gone on to specialise in mental health and can prescribe medication. A psychologist is not a medical doctor and does not prescribe, but specialises in psychological assessment and therapy. The right starting point depends on what you need, and some people benefit from seeing both.

At a glance

	Psychologist	Psychiatrist
Training	A specialised university degree in psychology, followed by a master's degree and two years of specialised training, or another general pathway; registered with the Psychology Board of Australia.	Medical degree, then at least five years of separate specialist psychiatry training; Fellow of the RANZCP.
Assessment and diagnosis	Psychological, cognitive and diagnostic assessment.	Psychiatric and medical assessment, including physical health and tests.
Therapy	Evidence-based psychological therapies, such as cognitive behaviour therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy and other structured, research-supported approaches, are the core of their work.	Some psychiatrists provide psychotherapy; many focus on diagnosis, and medication initiation and management.
Medication	Do not prescribe.	Prescribe and monitor medication.
Referral	Not needed to book; needed to claim a Medicare rebate.	GP referral needed for a Medicare rebate. At BeWell, all psychiatry appointments need a GP referral.
Medicare	Up to ten rebated sessions a year under Better Access, with a Mental Health Treatment Plan or a direct referral from a psychiatrist or paediatrician.	Rebated under psychiatry items; the amount depends on the consultation.

GPs also play a central role. Many people's mental health medications are prescribed and managed by their GP, often with input from a psychiatrist, and your GP is usually the best person to help you decide where to begin.

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What does a psychologist do?

Psychologists study human behaviour, thinking and emotion, and complete at least six years of university study and supervised practice before they can register. Their work centres on helping people understand what is going on and change it. They provide evidence-based therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy, carry out psychological and cognitive assessments, and help people build practical skills for the difficulties in front of them, whether that is anxiety, low mood, a relationship under strain or a question about how their own mind works.

What does a psychiatrist do?

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who have completed specialist training in psychiatry. Because they are medically trained, they consider physical health alongside mental health, can order tests, and can prescribe and monitor medication. Some psychiatrists provide psychotherapy, but many see people for a focused period to clarify a diagnosis or to start and adjust treatment, and then step back once things are settled.

How do I decide where to start?

A psychiatrist may be a good starting point if:

- you and your GP are considering medication, including for ADHD;
- the diagnosis is unclear, or more than one condition seems to be involved;
- treatment so far has not helped as much as hoped; or
- you would like a second opinion on a diagnosis or treatment plan.

A psychologist may be a good starting point if you would like to understand what is going on, learn practical strategies or work through something difficult in therapy. If you are unsure, your GP can help you decide, and so can we.

How BeWell's services fit together

At BeWell, psychologists and psychiatrists work in the same practice. Some people see only a psychologist, some see only a psychiatrist, and others benefit from coordinated care, where therapy, coaching and medication are planned together rather than in isolation. Research on collaborative care models for depression and anxiety, in which GPs and mental health professionals work together in a structured way, suggests these models are associated with better outcomes than usual care.

Our psychiatry follows a collaborative care model. A psychiatrist assesses you, starts or adjusts treatment and reviews it until it is stable. Where it is clinically appropriate, they then hand day-to-day management back to your GP with a clear written plan, and remain available for review if your needs change. For many people this means fewer specialist appointments and lower ongoing costs, with care that stays close to home.

Frequently asked questions

Is a psychiatrist better than a psychologist?

Neither is better; they offer different things. The right choice depends on your needs, and for some people a combination works best.

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Can a psychologist prescribe medication?

No. In Australia, psychologists do not prescribe. If medication might help, your psychologist can work with your GP or a psychiatrist to arrange it.

Do I need a psychiatrist for ADHD medication in WA?

Usually, yes. ADHD medication has traditionally been started by a psychiatrist or paediatrician, and for children under ten and more complex presentations that is still the case. From 2026, a small number of WA GPs who have completed specialist ADHD training are also able to assess and manage suitable patients aged ten and over.

How long will I see a psychiatrist for?

That depends on your needs. In our collaborative care model, the psychiatrist reviews your treatment until it is stable and then, where clinically appropriate, hands ongoing management to your GP with a written plan. You can return for review if your needs change.

Can a psychiatrist refer me to a psychologist?

Yes. Psychiatrists can refer directly to a psychologist under Medicare's Better Access initiative, without a separate GP plan.

Can I see a psychiatrist by telehealth?

Yes, for many appointments. At BeWell, first appointments with our psychiatrists are in person at Nedlands, and reviews may be in person or, where clinically supported, by telehealth.

How to start

If you are not sure where to begin, call us on **1300 451 494** and we will talk it through. GPs can refer for psychiatry or psychology through our Make a referral page.

Sources

- Psychology Board of Australia – registration and area of practice endorsement. psychologyboard.gov.au
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists – Your Health in Mind: what is a psychiatrist? yourhealthinmind.org
- Archer J et al. – Collaborative care for depression and anxiety problems. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (2012). cochranelibrary.com
- Department of Health, Disability and Ageing – Better Access FAQs (May 2026). health.gov.au
- WA Department of Health – ADHD diagnosis and treatment through GPs. health.wa.gov.au

This article is general information only and is not a substitute for advice about your own circumstances. If you need support urgently, call 000 or Lifeline on 13 11 14.