

PSYCHIATRIC SOCIAL WORKERS AND SUPPORT OF PATIENTS IN HEALTH CARE FACILITIES

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Abstract

The main goal of psychiatric social workers is to stabilize and support people experiencing intense psychological distress or behavioral issues that threaten their safety and well-being or the safety and well-being of others. Psychiatric social workers accomplish this through a combination of diagnostic assessments, psychosocial and risk assessments, individual and group therapy, and care coordination/case management services. Psychiatric social workers complete a variety of tasks when working with patients, including psychosocial and risk assessments, individualized and group psychotherapy and counseling, crisis intervention and support, care coordination, and discharge planning services. Psychiatric social workers are employed in various settings, ranging from intensive inpatient wards to outpatient psychiatric clinics. The responsibilities and patient populations of psychiatric social workers vary significantly depending on their work setting and the teams to which they are assigned at their place of employment. For example, some social workers within hospitals' psychiatric departments will specifically support severely mentally ill individuals involved in the criminal justice system or work exclusively with trauma victims. This study examines the role of psychiatric social workers in health facilities and the support and services they render to patients in a rapidly changing world.

Introduction

A substance use disorder (SUD) can be difficult to overcome for any person. However, when that person also lives with a mental illness, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, the level of care necessary to support this patient may require social workers who have experience providing psychiatric help. Psychiatric social work is a specialized type of medical social work that involves providing support, counseling, and therapy to and coordinating the care of people who are severely mentally ill and require hospitalization or other types of intensive

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psychiatric help. Social workers in this challenging and demanding field must work closely with individuals suffering from complex and difficult-to-manage conditions who are in deep emotional distress and may be a danger to themselves or others. Psychiatric social workers may also encounter difficulties in obtaining the resources and support needed by patients to fully address their problems. However, some individuals gravitate to this work because of its constant intellectual and professional challenges and the opportunity to help deeply vulnerable people.

TYPES OF PSYCHIATRIC WORKERS

In general, the types of psychiatric social workers are as follows:

1. Inpatient Psychiatric Social Workers
2. Emergency and Crisis Services Psychiatric Social Workers
3. Outpatient Psychiatric Social Workers

Depending on their work setting and specific role, some psychiatric social workers may fulfill the following tasks:

1. Inpatient
2. Outpatient and
3. Emergency Services.

Inpatient Psychiatric Social Workers

Inpatient psychiatric social workers work in the psychiatry departments of hospitals and medical centers with patients who have been hospitalized for debilitating or dangerous psychological and/or behavioral issues, such as severe substance abuse, psychosis, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and other conditions. Psychiatric social workers in inpatient hospital settings complete many tasks to support patients, including conducting psychosocial assessments to determine patients' mental health status and needs; providing counseling and psychotherapy and other clinical services to help clients address their emotional, behavioral, and mental health challenges; communicating and coordinating with the larger treatment team to optimize patients' physical and mental health care; connecting clients with relevant resources and services; and facilitating clients' transition to other care facilities or back to daily life through discharge planning and follow-ups.

Psychiatric departments in hospitals tend to have several units that treat different mental health or behavioral problems. "Within the psychiatry department, I'm on two teams, chemical dependency (CD) and adult mental health. CD is an entirely group-based program, and I help facilitate an early recovery group two days a week and a drop-in support group for dually diagnosed (substance use and mental illness) patients once a week," Friedman said to Social Work License Map. "I do intakes for new patients, see a caseload of individuals, and run groups within the adult team."

Inpatient psychiatric social workers play an important role in identifying and advocating for patients' needs as part of a larger medical team. "In hospital settings, psychiatric social workers are an integral part of the multidisciplinary team, making recommendations for treatment, rehabilitation, and social service connections," according to Lynsey Clark, MSW, to the Social Work License Map. She works as a psychiatric social worker at the inpatient psychiatric unit of San Francisco General Hospital. "Psychiatric social workers can make an enormous difference in the patients' material reality within the hospital setting through therapeutic interventions and by connecting them with valuable social services, which has the potential to improve their circumstances." We are also advocates for the patient, pushing for more time and better placements when needed."

In addition to daily communications with the treatment team for a given client or group of clients, inpatient psychiatric social workers meet regularly with medical staff to develop and alter a client's treatment plan as needed. "I work with psychiatrists (MDs), nurses (RNs, LVNs, and psyche techs), occupational therapists (OTs),

and other social workers (LCSWs and MSWs),” Clark said. “Treatment for all patients is team-based, and all disciplines meet four times a week to discuss the most appropriate treatment and care for the patient.”

Psychiatric Emergency Services and Crisis Response Social Workers

Psychiatric social workers conduct psychiatric assessments, short-term crisis support, and care coordination as part of a crisis or emergency services team for patients who are undergoing acute crises or are in danger of hurting themselves or others. Environments that employ crisis service psychiatric social workers include emergency care teams that work as part of a larger medical center and public health departments. Crisis and emergency services psychiatric social workers work briefly with clients to assess their needs, help them obtain the intensive care they require, and possibly recommend them for involuntary hospitalization. Crisis service environments tend to be more short-term than inpatient hospital psychiatric settings because patients are generally directed to hospitals or intensive care facilities where they can receive longer-term and more comprehensive care.

Paffenroth told Online MSW Programs that one of her main responsibilities is determining if patients need to be placed on a psychiatric hold and how the types of clients she serves tend to be severely ill and in need of immediate assistance and supervision. “The reasons that an individual would be placed on a hold are that they are currently a danger to themselves, a danger to others, or gravely disabled,” she said. “The first two categories are fairly straightforward. If someone is suicidal or homicidal, or if their actions are placing themselves or others at significant risk of danger, they would meet the following criteria: Gravely disabled refers to an individual who cannot take care of their most basic needs, such as eating, bathing, having a place to live, and attending to a serious medical condition, etc.”

Clark described her work in an emergency psychiatric setting, Psychiatric Emergency Services (PES) at Contra Costa County Regional Medical Center. “My patients were often experiencing psychotic episodes, mania, depression, suicidal ideation, homicidal ideation, and self-harming behaviors,” she said. “The work is extremely fast paced and demanding, as we are working with patients with very high acuity. Professional expectations included patient assessment for risk, brief therapy, family reunification, and patient transfer or discharge assistance.”

Outpatient Psychiatric Social Workers

Outpatient Psychiatric Social Workers provide therapy and care coordination services to individuals who do not require immediate hospitalization but still struggle with severe mental illness and debilitating emotional and/or behavioral issues. Patients in outpatient psychiatric settings are often at risk of needing hospitalization or have recently been discharged from an inpatient setting.

At Kaiser Permanente, Friedman also has experience working with clients in outpatient settings. “I also spend two mornings in the intensive outpatient program for patients who are at risk of psychiatric hospitalization or who have just been discharged from a higher level of care,” she said. “My patients are ages 18-70+ and come in with a pretty wide range of presenting problems, from heroin addiction to bipolar disorder to postpartum depression.” Outpatient Psychiatric Social Workers tend to work longer with patients and can even follow them through multiple systems to support them as they transition from intensive care home or to another facility.

Charles Berman, MSW, is an intensive outpatient psychiatric social worker with the citywide case management forensic team of the University of California, San Francisco, where he supports and provides therapy to severely mentally ill adults who are also involved in the criminal justice system. “My colleagues and I provide intensive wraparound services to clients as they cycle in and out of the jail, the state hospitals, local hospitals, and the community,” he said.

In addition to her work in inpatient psychiatric settings, Clark worked in an outpatient psychiatric setting. “I provided individual therapy for patients with various mental health needs, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder,” she said. “In an outpatient psychiatric setting, social workers are employed as therapists and perform the same duties as MFTs, PsyDs, and PhDs. They conduct various groups, including dialectical behavioral therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and seeking safety, among others.”

Diagnostic Assessments

One of the most important tasks of psychiatric social workers is to conduct different diagnostic assessments of patients’ mental health to determine their psychological issues and needs. Psychosocial assessment is the main assessment conducted by psychiatric social workers, which requires the psychiatric social worker to gather information, including but not limited to;

1. Primary and secondary psychological conditions (depression, severe anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, etc.)
2. Behavioral issues (e.g., substance abuse, violence, and problems with emotional regulation)
3. Familial, social, cultural, and occupational background.
4. Physical health status and medical treatment history.
5. Mental health status (measured by mood, cognition, motor skills, and perception tests).
6. Patients’ mental health treatment history
7. Current medications and support systems for treatment.

Psychiatric social workers may also use information gained from the psychosocial assessment to complete risk assessments, which are targeted evaluations of whether an individual may experience an adverse outcome in their current state and situation. Psychiatric social workers use risk assessments to determine the level of care a patient need (hospitalization, inpatient psychiatric hold, or IOP).

Care coordination (case management)

Once the mental health status and treatment history of the patients have been determined, psychiatric social workers are responsible for overall case management. This can include ensuring that their patients receive the mental health support they need by;

1. Developing a patient treatment plan in collaboration with medical and mental health staff using psychosocial assessment information.
2. Monitoring a patient’s progress throughout treatment.
3. Communicate with the treatment team as needed regarding developments in the mental health status of patients.
4. Explaining different treatment options and plans to patients.
5. Connecting patients to relevant resources within and outside the treatment facility.
6. Coordinate safe and effective discharges when patients transition to a different treatment facility or return home.

Psychiatric social workers are also often responsible for keeping medical and mental health treatment records to ensure continuity of care if/when patient’s transition to different psychiatric settings or providers.

Individual and group psychotherapy

Psychiatric social workers may deliver short- or long-term psychotherapy to patients, utilizing different clinical social work methods according to each patient’s psychological situation and needs, depending on their work setting. Psychotherapeutic methods include cognitive behavioral therapy, harm reduction techniques (for

behavioral issues such as chemical dependency), motivational interviewing, dialectical behavioral therapy, mindfulness training, and experiential therapy.

Challenges in Psychiatric Social Work

Psychiatric social work is a demanding and difficult profession. Psychiatric social workers must provide intensive and, at times, holistic support to individuals suffering from severe, complex, and multifaceted mental health and behavioral issues. In addition, seeing individuals in acute suffering and who may pose a danger to themselves and others on a daily basis can prove disconcerting and draining for some professionals in the field. “It’s hard to describe how to prepare for watching a patient be restrained, a child receiving sedation, the assaults that can be witnessed that make the job hazardous,” Clark said. “Being aware and knowing safety precautions is vital for keeping the unit safe for others.”

Psychiatric social work can be unpredictable and dangerous.

“One of the most challenging aspects of my job is the potential for danger.” When going out into the community to do evaluations, I do not know what to expect,” Paffenroth said. “I try to gather as much collateral information as possible before going. However, you still do not know what you are walking into most of the time.” The hazards of the job are not the only challenges that psychiatric social workers encounter. “I have never found the needs of my patients to be a challenge; rather, connecting my patients with a finite number of resources has always been the most frustrating part of my work,” Clark said. “In addition, the process and structural problems of the distribution, management, and funding of social and mental health services are equally as frustrating.” Psychiatric social workers in the field are encouraged to develop a plan for strong and consistent self-care. “I believe the largest asset a student can possess is a commitment to the patients and really good self-care,” Clark said.

Berman described the importance of establishing boundaries between one’s professional and personal life and engaging in self-care practices to stay balanced and energized at work. “It has been challenging to set boundaries between my work and personal life that will allow this career to be sustainable in the long-term. I have started forcing myself to leave work on time, even if not everything is done,” he said. “Because the truth is, no matter how hard you work, it will never be enough.” I have also become more committed to weekly therapy, which is important for self-care and professional development.”

Paffenroth said that awareness and caution on the job are extremely important. “The best way to address the safety challenges is to be very aware of them,” she advised. “This starts by asking the referring party if the individual has a history of violence or has made any threats of violence, gathering as much information about the individual’s history as possible.” Once on scene, remain aware of your surroundings and do not enter someone’s home if you feel threatened or unsafe. We always go out in teams of two, and we always prioritize safety.”

CONCLUSION

Psychiatric social work may be a rewarding field for individuals drawn to a fast-paced, constantly challenging environment and to responsibilities that are both intellectually engaging and socially impactful. “I decided to become a psychiatric social worker partly because it is a way to combine my interest in the law with my interest in helping people,” Paffenroth said. “I’m jubilant where I ended up professionally.” Paffenroth cited the gratitude of her patients’ families as her main source of professional energy. “One area I would like to highlight about this work is the way we help people who are not our direct clients. For example, family members, friends, and even experienced clinicians call us when they have encountered a serious crisis or when they do not know what to do and need help,” she said. Because of the unique expertise and services provided by psychiatric social workers, they can assist patients and their families in ways that other mental health professionals cannot.

“It is extremely rewarding to offer these people help in their time of need. “Families, friends, and providers are often profusely thankful and tell us that they do not know what they would have done without our help,” Paffenroth said. “Through this feedback, the impact of our service goes beyond just helping the client get to the hospital. We can start someone on the road to help and recover in a way that most other providers cannot. That makes my job pretty special.”

Clark said that in addition to the knowledge of the large-scale impact of her work, the daily successes she has with clients are also deeply rewarding. “The highlights are harder to measure because the successes can sometimes occur on a small scale,” she noted. “On any given day, the highlights of my job could be filing a police report, having a meaningful conversation, or transferring a patient with chronic schizophrenia to an appropriate facility.” She also noted how one’s professional team can make a huge difference. “Working on a collaborative team of professionals continues to be one of the best parts of the job,” she said.

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