

## Pursuing a Career in Health Psychology

### ALL ABOUT HEALTH AND BEHAVIOR

Doctors diagnose illnesses and surgeons operate to cure them, but what factors contribute to our health? That's where the skills of health psychologists can help.

From working in clinical settings to conducting research and influencing health care policy, health psychologists measure the impact of behavior on health and create ways to help people make the behavior choices that induce good health and prevent illness. In this field, psychologists have many professional options, and the demand for their expertise is high. That's because hospitals and other health care entities realize the many ways health psychologists can improve their strategies for care, particularly in the area of prevention.

What psychological factors determine whether someone makes a good or poor food choice when given both options? What motivates them to exercise? Why are women at risk for breast cancer not getting regular mammograms? These are all questions that health psychologists are addressing.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

Health psychologists are essential in clinical settings, where they conduct clinical interviews and behavioral assessments. They may also participate in interventions with individuals or groups — for example, programs to help people reduce stress, quit smoking and avoid sedentary behaviors.

There will also always be a need for research conducted by health psychologists. Containing health care costs is a priority for health care decision makers and policy makers, which is an area of research where health psychologists can contribute in meaningful ways. They may study the causes of health problems and how to prevent them, or explore why certain groups don't seek care when they need it. They may also help patients understand and come to terms with a diagnosis, or follow a treatment regimen in order to increase the probability of their full recovery.

### MAKING IT HAPPEN

While a bachelor's degree is the foundation for a career in health psychology, most careers require a doctoral degree.

The career path for someone with a master's degree often includes positions such as a research assistant or behavior specialist. Typically, they work under the supervision of a licensed psychologist.

Those with doctoral degrees have the most options; they are able to work independently and will often supervise research or clinical teams, including those working in the areas of managing weight and preventing obesity, pain management, helping individuals cope with genetic diseases, preventing re-hospitalization of patients and planning walkable communities to encourage physical activity.

### WHAT YOU CAN EARN

Salaries for health psychologists depend on geographic location, work setting, educational background and job experience.

The American Psychological Association's 2009 salary survey found that health psychologists working in direct human services earned an average of \$80,000 per year. Many who work in large universities or health systems earn more.

*Health psychology focuses on how biological, social and psychological factors influence health and illness. Health psychologists study how patients handle illness, why some people don't follow medical advice and the most effective ways to control pain or change poor health habits. They also develop health care strategies that foster emotional and physical well-being.*

Find out where psychology can take you at **[WWW.PSYCHSCIENCEACTION.ORG](http://WWW.PSYCHSCIENCEACTION.ORG)**.