

**The British  
Psychological Society**  
Promoting excellence in psychology

# Health psychology in primary care and community settings

A guide for GPs and  
Public Health Practitioners



Promoting health, understanding illness,  
improving healthcare

[www.bps.org.uk/dhp](http://www.bps.org.uk/dhp)



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Division of Health Psychology

# The role

## What is a health psychologist?

Health psychologists are experts in applying psychological knowledge, to design tailored chronic disease self-management interventions, to promote health behaviour change, to inform configuration of health services system and to inform health policy. They work with GPs, public health and hospital consultants, patients, carers/families, directly with individuals or with organisations.

## What areas are their skills used in?

Health psychologists work in a wide range of areas relating to health, illness, and health care. These include:

- **Management of patients with long-term physical conditions:** health psychologists (trained to Stage 2 level) work across a range of chronic conditions (including diabetes, heart disease, chronic pain, chronic fatigue syndrome) to improve coping and self-management skills in patients with both physical and psychological support needs. They work one to one or in groups.
- **Health promotion and behaviour change:** by applying evidence-based interventions to primary prevention of illness or disease by increasing patient engagement with physical activity, healthier eating, smoking reduction. Developing, delivering and evaluating behaviour change programmes for a wide range of health damaging behaviours.
- **Health service improvement:** designing effective health care systems (for instance increasing uptake of service use, for example cervical screening).
- **Expert advice or consultancy:** advising health professionals and patients, for example gathering evidence to improve services such as pain or weight management and making evidence based recommendations.
- **Service evaluation and research:** health psychologists can evaluate services using a variety of research methods, which enables them to conduct research, provide expert advice or collaborate on a study, for example studying the links between a range of psychosocial factors, for example stress and health.
- **Teaching and communication:** for example training health professionals in behaviour change and motivational techniques to improve uptake of services or support weight management. This can also enhance practitioner–patient relationships and adherence to treatment.

# How we can help

## Primary care and general practice

Health psychologists support primary care and community services through:

- direct psychological work with patients, families and carers (for example helping them to adjust to chronic illness, pain management and improving treatment adherence);
- direct support with lifestyle behavioural change for example CVD risk reduction or illness symptom management;
- pacing and goal-setting for rehabilitation and maintenance programmes;
- psychological preparation for surgery and confidence building within rehabilitation (this can reduce bed days);
- support for allied health professions to improve psychological and communication skills.

## Public health services

Health psychologists are working to:

- improve adherence to public health screening programmes and targets;
- support community initiatives to deliver and support healthy living interventions in local communities;
- improve outcomes on interventions targeted at smoking cessation, physical activity, drug and alcohol, diet and stress;
- train front-line health care professionals staff to deliver brief interventions to support patient self-management;
- reduce GP attendance by increasing public awareness of risks to health and improving self-management of illness; and
- implement strategic planning and service development to advance health check programmes, improve quality of life outcomes and reduce health risks.

## Commissioning health psychology services

NHS Trusts are commissioning health psychologists to deliver and to evaluate health interventions for patients in primary care and for 'at risk' populations. These include direct one to one patient contact as well as group deliver and staff training on brief interventions to support trusts in meeting Commissioning for Quality and Innovation (CQUIN) targets.

# Important information

## Regulation and training of health psychologists

A Practitioner Health Psychologist is a protected title and as such health psychologists are regulated by the Health & Care Professions Council ([www.hcpc-uk.org](http://www.hcpc-uk.org)).

## What are the essential qualifications and person specification for employing a health psychologist?

Health psychologists are registered by the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC) and have trained to a level to be eligible for full membership of the Division of Health Psychology within the British Psychological Society (BPS), the professional body. All qualified health psychologists must engage in and record their continuing professional development (CPD) for psychology each year. Health psychologists in training must be registered with the BPS Stage 2 training route.

Registered health psychologists who are Chartered with the BPS have undertaken a minimum of six years of training and specialised in health psychology for a minimum of three years.



Find out more at:

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