CAREER KIT

Licensed Mental Health Counselor Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Licensed Mental Health Counselor

2026-11 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

howtobecome — independent career guides

SECTION 1

At a glance

A licensed mental health counselor (LMHC, called LPC or LCPC in many states) needs a master's degree in counseling, 2,000 to 4,000 hours of supervised practice depending on the state, and a passing score on a national counseling exam. Plan on about 6 to 8 years from starting college, tuition of roughly $30,000 to $80,000 for the master's, and BLS median pay of $59,350 a year for the broader counselor group in May 2025. The counselor path differs from social work: the training is in counseling theory and therapy rather than case management and systems work.

Timeline	About 6–8 years: 4-year bachelor's, 2–3 year master's, then 2–3 years of supervised practice
Typical cost	$30,000–$100,000+ for a master's; $500–$1,500 for exams, applications, and supervision costs
Education	Master's degree in counseling (60-credit programs accredited by CACREP are the common standard)
License	State license required to practice (LMHC, LPC, LCPC, or similar title); all states require it
Median pay	$59,350 per year (substance abuse, behavioral disorder, and mental health counselors)
Job outlook	+18% (2025–35), much faster than average; about 50,500 openings a year

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Earn a bachelor's degree

Time: 4 years · Cost: $20,000–$100,000+

Almost any bachelor's degree works, but psychology, human services, or sociology make graduate admission easier. Take statistics, abnormal psychology, and developmental psychology if your school offers them, and volunteer at a crisis line or community agency to build a record of working with people.

2. Choose a counseling master's program

Time: 2–3 years · Cost: $30,000–$80,000

Look for a clinical mental health counseling program accredited by CACREP, which most states accept and which can simplify licensing and moving between states. Programs usually run 60 credit hours and include a practicum and an internship of at least 600 hours. Some states still license from 48-credit programs, so check your state board before you enroll.

3. Complete the practicum and internship

Time: 1–2 years (within the master's)

During your master's you counsel real clients under a supervisor. This is where you build skills in assessment, treatment planning, and crisis response, and it often leads to your first job. Keep records of every hour and supervisor signature, since boards ask for them.

4. Register as an associate or intern with your state board

Time: 1–3 months

After graduating, most states require you to register as a provisional or associate counselor (titles such as LPC-Associate or LMHC Intern) before you accumulate post-degree hours. You can usually work in agencies, group practices, or hospitals under an approved supervisor, but you cannot practice independently yet.

5. Pass the national counseling exam

Time: 2–4 months of study · Cost: Roughly $195–$275 per exam in NBCC state supplements; fees vary by state, so check your board and NBCC

Depending on the state you take the National Counselor Examination (NCE) or the National Clinical Mental Health Counseling Examination (NCMHCE), both given by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC). The NCE is a 200-item multiple-choice test of core knowledge, and the NCMHCE is a case-based clinical exam. Some states add a jurisprudence exam on state law.

6. Complete supervised clinical hours

Time: 2–3 years

Most states require about 2,000 to 4,000 hours of post-master's supervised clinical work over at least 2 years, with a set number of face-to-face supervision hours. Some states count internship hours toward the total. Keep supervision logs and agreements up to date.

7. Apply for your full license

Time: 1–3 months · Cost: $100–$400 plus renewals

Submit your transcripts, exam scores, hours verification, supervisor attestations, and a background check to your state counseling board. Once approved, you can practice independently, supervise others in some states, and bill insurance. Licenses renew every 1 to 2 years with continuing education.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Bachelor's degree	$20,000	$100,000	Typical range; community college transfer lowers the cost
Master's in counseling	$30,000	$80,000	Typical range, varies by school and in-state tuition
NCE or NCMHCE exam	$195	$275	NBCC state licensure supplements list fees from about $195 to $275 depending on the state; confirm with your board and NBCC, as states may also charge their own fees
State associate registration and license fees	$100	$600	Typical range; varies by state
Paid clinical supervision (if not provided by employer)	$0	$7,500	Many employers include supervision at no charge; private supervision often costs $75–$150 per hour
Exam prep materials	$100	$500	Study guides, practice tests, or prep courses
Total	**$50,395**	**$188,875**	

Requirements

Education	A master's degree in counseling, usually clinical mental health counseling. CACREP accreditation is widely accepted; confirm your state's required credit hours (48 vs. 60).
Supervised experience	About 2,000 to 4,000 post-degree hours of supervised clinical practice, completed over at least two years in many states. The exact number varies by state.
Exam	A national exam, either the NCE or NCMHCE from NBCC, and in some states a state law and ethics exam. Your state board decides which.
State license	BLS notes all states require mental health counselors to be licensed. Titles vary: LMHC, LPC, LPCC, LCPC, and others.
Background check	Fingerprints and criminal background checks are standard for licensure and for agency jobs.
Continuing education	Required to renew, often 20 to 40 hours every one to two years, including ethics. Some states require training in suicide prevention or telehealth.
Skills	Active listening, empathy, clinical judgment, documentation, crisis response, and the ability to keep professional boundaries.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Choose your route

Days 1–30

Goal: Pick programs and learn your state's licensing rules.

- ☐ Find your state counseling board and read its requirements
- ☐ Check credit-hour and supervision rules (48 vs. 60 credits)
- ☐ Compare 3 CACREP programs on cost, format, and internship help
- ☐ Ask admissions about practicum site placement
- ☐ Volunteer at a crisis line or community agency
- ☐ Talk with a licensed counselor about daily work

Phase 2: Build experience

Days 31–60

Goal: Strengthen your application and prepare for supervised work.

- ☐ Request recommendation letters
- ☐ Write a personal statement about why counseling
- ☐ Take a mental health first aid training
- ☐ Learn to write case notes
- ☐ Review the NBCC exam outlines
- ☐ Research employers that provide free supervision

Phase 3: Apply and plan licensure

Days 61–90

Goal: Apply for programs or associate roles and plan your hours.

- [ ] Submit program applications
- [ ] Prepare your resume with internship and volunteer work
- [ ] Identify an approved supervisor
- [ ] Set up a log for hours
- [ ] Schedule your exam once eligible
- [ ] Plan the license application timeline

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ Official transcripts
- ☐ Graduate degree or proof of enrollment
- ☐ Practicum and internship evaluations
- ☐ Supervision agreement
- ☐ Hours log signed by supervisors
- ☐ NBCC exam registration and score report
- ☐ State license application and fees
- ☐ Background check and fingerprints
- ☐ Professional liability insurance

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

National Counselor Examination (NCE)

What it is: NBCC 200-item multiple-choice exam on core counseling areas such as human growth, assessment, helping relationships, and professional practice.

How to prepare: 6–10 weeks using NBCC's content outline and practice tests.

National Clinical Mental Health Counseling Examination (NCMHCE)

What it is: NBCC case-based exam where you assess, diagnose, and plan treatment for simulated clients. Used by some states instead of the NCE.

How to prepare: 8–12 weeks working through clinical case simulations.

State jurisprudence or law exam (some states)

What it is: Tests your knowledge of state counseling law, ethics, and board rules.

How to prepare: A few days to a couple of weeks reviewing your state's statutes and rules.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a counselor?

Tip: Tie your answer to real experience helping people.

2. What is your counseling approach?

Tip: Name one or two models (CBT, person-centered) and give an example.

3. How do you handle a client in crisis?

Tip: Describe safety assessment and escalation steps.

4. How do you keep boundaries?

Tip: Give examples of dual relationship and self-disclosure judgment.

5. How do you use supervision?

Tip: Show you seek feedback and bring hard cases.

6. How do you handle confidentiality limits?

Tip: Mention duty to warn and mandated reporting.

7. Tell us about a hard case from internship.

Tip: Protect confidentiality and focus on what you learned.

8. How do you prevent burnout?

Tip: Describe self-care, peer support, and supervision.

9. How do you work with clients from different backgrounds?

Tip: Show cultural humility.

10. Are you pursuing full licensure?

Tip: Share your hours so far and exam date.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Completed a 700-hour clinical mental health counseling internship
- Provided individual therapy to adults with depression and anxiety under supervision
- Wrote intake assessments and treatment plans in an electronic health record
- Co-led a weekly skills group for adults in recovery
- Responded to crisis calls using a safety planning protocol
- Maintained a case load of 12 clients with timely documentation

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Enrolling in a program that does not meet your state's credit-hour rules
2. Not registering as an associate before counting hours
3. Losing supervision logs or signatures
4. Choosing a supervisor your board does not approve
5. Waiting to take the national exam until the last minute
6. Not asking employers whether they provide free supervision

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS: Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, and Mental Health Counselors**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/substance-abuse-behavioral-disorder-and-mental-health-counselors.htm

- **NBCC**

https://www.nbcc.org/

- **CACREP**

https://www.cacrep.org/

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $38,940	**$59,350 per year ($28.53 per hour)**	More than $97,590

Outlook: BLS projects 18% growth from 2025 to 2035, much faster than average, adding about 98,000 jobs and creating about 50,500 openings a year. There were about 533,400 jobs in 2025. This BLS figure covers the whole counselor group, so licensed counselors in private practice or hospitals may earn more than the median, while entry-level jobs in community agencies often pay less.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, and Mental Health Counselors, May 2025 wage data; projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/substance-abuse-behavioral-disorder-and-mental-health-counselors.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.