

5 Reasons to Study Psychiatry

Mental illness can be just as debilitating as physical illness—sometimes even more so. As a medical student, you learn about medical specializations, and during rotations you try them all. Psychiatry is a specialized field of medicine because of its focus on mental health.

Currently, there is a national shortage of psychiatrists, and the demand is big. According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#), US workers lose nearly \$2 billion in wages annually because mental health problems inhibit their ability to work. In a [2016 report](#) from the Association of American Medical Colleges, an additional 2,800 psychiatrists are needed to fulfill the US's needs this year alone. We haven't even touched on the shortage of highly-qualified child psychiatrists.

Besides a booming job market, medical students on the brink of deciding their fields and applying for residency should consider psychiatry for other reasons, like its tremendous flexibility, its sense of reward, the ability to become more empathetic, and psychiatry's overall usefulness in a fast-paced world.

Let's take a closer look at 5 reasons why you should study psychiatry.

1. Work-Life Balance

If there ever was a field in medicine in which you could work a “normal” day, it's psychiatry. You're generally on-call less, and you can shape your schedule to meet your family's needs. The field's flexibility is one reason so many psychiatrists are drawn to it—it's easy to practice the work-life balance that you help to create for so many of your patients.

If catering to family life isn't on your list, psychiatry also offers tremendous opportunity to travel and work.

2. Rewarding

Psychiatry—like other medical specialties—is evidence-based. It's shaped by scientific evidence—and there's a lot of it. Here's what's rewarding about it: **you can dramatically improve your patients' lives**. You can help patients who were once institutionalized indefinitely by treating them so that they can live at home (even partially), work, and have relationships with people.

As a psychiatrist, you have the unique opportunity to improve the mental health of your patients and improve their quality of life. You can weigh and treat the impact of mental illness on your patients—and help them function in society.

3. Great Timing

We've told you there's a need—there are openings in clinical work, research, and leadership that all strive to make positive impacts for those who suffer from mental illnesses.

There's also tremendous research happening in [neuroscience](#). Scientists are beginning to understand the complicated systems of our brains—and how they affect our behavior. There's blossoming research on neurotransmitters and brain stimulation therapies. There's also significant research on drugs, including a study on gut bacteria and its role in stress, inflammation, and mood. There are also significant studies about Alzheimer's and dementia—two mental illnesses that affect a growing geriatric population.

4. Empathy

To treat your patients effectively, you must be able to empathize.

All physicians practice empathy on some level, but psychiatrists more than most. As a psychiatrist, you are required to get to know your patients at a depth that most physicians don't.

How do we conceptualize illness? Psychiatrists feel empathetic not just at the level of understanding that their patients are suffering, but must also be able to understand how a patient understands his or her illness.

It's not just about facts, knowledge, tests, and treatment. It's about connection—human and scientific.

5. Utility

Psychiatry is useful for any medical specialty. Why? For starters, it gives practitioners a fine-tuned sense of empathy (see #4).

All medical practitioners should have some understanding of it. No matter what a medical student plans to do after graduation, he or she will encounter patients with mental health issues. It's better to be able to recognize them than not, so that you can advocate for your patients and get them the help they need, even if that help is not in your office.

Psychiatry gives medical students key skills in how to develop positive relationships with patients. That's the key: relationships. All doctors need to be able to develop those positive relationships so that they can treat their patients. Rare is the patient who hates their physician, but goes to them anyway.

Understanding who your patients are, where they're coming from, and what's important to them is often just as important as figuring out their medical treatment.

Find out more about careers in [mental healthcare](#).

Alyssa Walker

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Why I Chose Psychiatry as a Career

Psychiatry: In defence of the Cinderella speciality.

In my experience, most medical students enjoy learning about mental illness and talking to mentally ill people, who often have a refreshing knack for saying things exactly how they are. In a fit of inspiration, some medical students tell me that [psychiatry](#) is the only specialty that enables them to think about themselves, about other people, and about life in general. They also like the lifestyle (in the UK): an hour for each patient, 'special interest' days, protected time for teaching, light on calls from home, and guaranteed [career](#) progression. In medicine they might treat yet another anonymous case of asthma, chest pain, or pulmonary oedema. In surgery they might do one knee replacement after another, up until the day they retire or collapse. But in psychiatry there can be no factory line, no standard procedure, and no mindless protocol: each patient is unique, and each patient has something unique to return to the psychiatrist. I often come across those same students again, months or sometimes years later. After the smiles and the niceties, it transpires that they are no longer so interested in psychiatry. So what happened?



'Psychiatry' derives from the Greek 'psyche' (soul, butterfly) and 'iatros' (healing), and means 'healing of the soul'. In Greek myth, Psyche's lover was no other than Eros.

Source: Wikicommons

The students are never too sure, but I think I have an idea. When I was a medical student in London, an American firm offered me a highly paid job as a strategy consultant in their Paris office. So I gladly left medicine, and the many inconveniences of working in (and increasingly 'for') the National Health Service. I had a great time in Paris, but the job itself turned out to be more about dealing with [personality disorders](#) than about having brilliant ideas. I quit after six months and freelanced as an English tutor to high-flying executives, bankers, venture capitalists, and such like. As my clients already spoke good English and merely wanted to improve their fluency, all I had to do was to make conversation with them. My lessons often turned into something akin to [psychotherapy](#), as I realised that I could make my clients open their hearts and minds simply by listening to them speak. Although they seemed to have everything in life, they were actually deeply unhappy, and had rarely stopped to ask themselves why. I wanted to find out why, so I decided to go back to the UK, do my house jobs (internships), and specialise in psychiatry. I had always been far too 'ambitious' to consider psychiatry, but by then it had become clear that I didn't want to pursue a career that didn't allow me to think and feel, and to relate to others and to the world in a genuine and meaningful way. There are not many such jobs, but psychiatry—along with general practice, teaching, academia, and the clergy—is certainly one of them, and even, arguably, their archetypal form.

The following year while going about my house jobs I put up with all sorts of abuse from my colleagues in medicine and surgery. One of the other house officers (interns), by then a good

buddy, took me aside one day and said with an [alcoholic](#) mixture of concern and disdain: ‘Why do you want to go into psychiatry? You’re a good doctor. Can’t you see you’re wasting your talents?’ It became very clear, first, that the stigma that people with a mental disorder are made to feel also extends to the doctors who look after them; and, second, that this stigma emanates most strongly from the medical profession itself, mired as it is in middle class preoccupations and prejudices and, as a whole, far too grounded in [neurosis](#) not to be terrified of [psychosis](#).

Of course, it is simply not true that psychiatry is ‘a waste of talent’. The term ‘psychiatry’ was first used 200 years ago in 1808, in a 188-page paper by Johann Christian Reil. In this paper, Reil argued for the urgent creation of a medical specialty to be called ‘psychiatry’, and contended that only the very best physicians had the skills to join it. These physicians needed to have not only an understanding of the body, but also a much broader range of skills than standard physicians. **Indeed, a psychiatrist can change a person’s entire outlook with a single sentence, so long as he can find the right words at the right time.** No protocols, no high-tech equipment or expensive drugs, no pain or side-effects, and no complications or follow-up. Now that is talent, and one so great that I can only ever aim at it. And each time I fail, I always have medicine to fall back upon.

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Is being a psychiatrist worth it?

Absolutely, definitely, surely... Undoubtedly.

I think becoming a Psychiatrist is the best that could have happened to me professionally.

Psychiatry is a skill based science. It requires finesse of a surgeon with calm and poise of an artisan. It keeps challenging me every day, and satisfaction of being able to help someone in distress is the highest reward. Helping a person and a family overcome the odds which are stacked against them because of mental illness is most challenging, but also most gratifying.

Yes it is a challenge each day. The society at large thinks of psychiatrist and their patients as crazy, mad, eccentric, oddball etc, however it is indeed a helping profession where persons and families in extreme distress come to you to help in relief from the same. In the outpatient setting, the psychiatric patients just like you and me, they are doctors, nurses and teachers, etc. They are people like you and me fighting their battles, against the illness, against the social stigma, against the larger societal current, and many more.

It is indeed totally worth it.

Thank you

Dr. Paramjeet Singh

Consultant Psychiatrist

Benefits of Psychiatry

Sep 28, 2016

The state of our nation when it comes to mental health issues is a bit precarious. While the country has made greater strides within the past 50 years in terms of how we perceive individuals with mental health challenges, as well as investing in better treatments and methods of discovery, there is still much to be addressed. There are still numerous stigmas associated with having mental health issues, especially in places such as the average workplace, the military and other venues. On the other hand, the good news is that awareness is growing, and there are strong pushes to get a better balance with our mental health in our lives, and receive the treatment we need to live a well-rounded life.

So when it comes to mental health treatment, what makes psychiatry so important? The ability to have access to proper mental health care is increasingly critical, and has been highlighted by the growing number of children, adolescents, adults and seniors who are struggling with particular behavioral health issues or mental health conditions in this country. We are seeing an increasing number of addictions on the rise, such as opiate use, alcohol and other drug abuse. Depression rates have continued increasing as well, and there is a serious issue within our military, as the suicide rate has skyrocketed.

Part of the solution is to help fight against stigmas associated with having mental health conditions, and making sure that men and women are able to get the help that they need to treat their conditions. Psychiatry is beneficial in this way, by:

Helping to Make a Significant Personal Change

Psychiatry helps give an individual the power to make major changes in their life, and to help target the exact issues relating to their mental or behavioral health challenges. The guidance and support an individual receives is usually a key aspect of being able to diagnose, address and help put specific plans into motion in order to heal and alleviate symptoms.

To Pinpoint the Specific Issues

Sometimes mental health issues are directly related to an individual's emotional state, their previous experiences and the challenges that they have faced in their life. At other times, it can stem from more psychological issues, or potentially even biological challenges. Sometimes it is difficult to identify until one is able to be examined in detail by a mental health professional, psychiatrist or doctor.

Improving Your Quality of Life

Mental health or behavioral health conditions can really interrupt an individual's personal life at times, especially in severe cases. Having the ability to be free from depression, anxiety, addictive tendencies or other psychiatric illnesses can free one to live the life they were meant to live.

Psychiatry continues to play an incredibly important role in our society more than ever. For those who may be suffering from mental health challenges, or who have a friend or family member

who is struggling, it is never too late to start getting the help that you or they might need. Reach out to your local mental health professional and begin to improve your life in ways you never thought possible before.

Helping Others

The most significant advantage to being a psychiatrist is working in a profession devoted to helping others. Whether a patient is suffering from mental health issues related to a traumatic experience, substance abuse, difficult circumstances, depression or hereditary disorders, psychiatrists are trained to diagnose and treat these issues through a variety of methods, including investigative communication and prescription medication. Oftentimes, the gratification obtained from helping others is rewarding enough.

There are several opportunities for growth and development.

Working as a psychiatrist provides you with several opportunities for advancement, personal growth, and professional recognition each year. It is a great career to help personal growth, shape you to be a much better person.

There are high levels of prejudice directed toward psychiatrists.

It is not unusual for society to look down on the conditions that a psychiatrist attempts to treat. Although this perspective is incorrect, the idea that dealing with these mental concerns is evidence of personal weakness is an attitude that continues to persist. Some people don't even see psychiatry as a legitimate medical practice. These prejudices endure even in the face of qualified research studies, so it is an ongoing issue with which you must cope if your goal is to break into this field.

<https://www.psychiatry.org/residents-medical-students/medical-students/choosing-a-career-in-psychiatry>