Mental health nurse

Mental health nursing is a demanding but rewarding career choice. Your role would be promoting and supporting a person’s recovery and enabling them to have more involvement and control over their condition.

Why choose mental health nursing

There are many reasons why you should consider a career as a mental health nurse. It offers you the chance to make a difference, a high degree of flexibility and a career with excellent employment prospects.

"I also love that I have a guaranteed job for life, which I enjoy – a lot of my friends are jealous!" Cherie Lawrence, mental health nurse.

Read Cherie’s story [1]

Working life

For some people, mental health problems can be triggered by an event such as divorce, the death of someone close, birth, alcohol and drug abuse or changes in personal circumstances, including at work.

Your role is to build effective relationships with people who use your services, and also with their relatives and carers. You might help one person to take their medication correctly while advising another about relevant therapies or social activities.

Success comes from being able to establish trusting relationships quickly, to help individuals understand their situation and get the best possible outcome. You will be trained about the
legal context of your work and also be able to identify whether and when someone may be at risk of harming themselves or someone else.

Helping people back to mental health is every bit as valuable and satisfying as caring for those with a physical illness.

**Where will you work?**

Mental health nurses are usually based in hospitals or in the community, as this is where the majority of mental healthcare is offered. If you work in a residential setting, you may do shifts and provide 24-hour care.

Within a hospital you might work in a:

- psychiatric intensive care [2] unit
- psychiatric ward
- outpatients unit
- specialist unit dealing with eating disorders.

In the community you could work at a:

- GP surgery
- prison
- community health care centre
- residential centre
- patients’ own homes.

You would work as part of a team which includes general practitioners [3], psychologists [4], social workers [5], psychiatrists [6], occupational therapists [7], arts therapists [8] and healthcare assistants [9].

*The biggest shame of all would be to overlook such a fantastic career opportunity, with all its life-changing experiences*. Christopher Dzikiti, modern matron

*Read Chris’s story* [10]

**How to become a mental health nurse**

To become a mental health nurse you’ll need to train and study at degree level - either through a full-time university course or a nursing degree apprenticeship. Entry requirements vary depending on where you’d like to study. You can find a full-time mental health nursing course to suit you using our [Course Finder tool]. [11]
Want to find out more?

- Find out about the entry requirements for mental health nursing [12]
- Find out about the skills and personal characteristics of a mental health nurse [13]
- Find out about the training and development opportunities in mental health nursing [14]
- Find out about studying to be a nurse [15]

Pay and conditions

Most jobs in the NHS are covered by the Agenda for Change (AfC) pay scales [16]. This pay system covers all staff except doctors, dentists and the most senior managers. Mental health nurses in the NHS will usually start on band 5 and work standard hours of 37.5 per week. With further experience, training and qualifications, they can apply for more senior posts. Primary mental health workers working in child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) will typically be at bands 6 and 7. Terms and conditions can vary for employers outside of the NHS, such as the police force or prison service.

Where the role can lead

Once you have qualified as a mental health nurse, there are a wide range of opportunities. You could specialise in working with children and adolescents, as a primary mental health worker; or women or in a field such as transcultural psychiatry, looking at how mental disorders and their treatment can be influenced by cultural and ethnic factors. You may want to work or move into management [17], teaching or clinical research [18].

More information on training and development in mental health nursing [14].

Nursing careers resource

A careers resource has been jointly developed by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Health Education England (HEE) to help registered nurses and the clinical support workforce plan their health careers effectively. It shows different ways that you can develop your career from a band 5 role with case studies, videos and next steps.

Visit the RCN/HEE careers resource for registered band 5 nurses [19]
There are an estimated 35,000 mental health nurses in today’s NHS workforce. The need for more high-quality staff is growing with the number of undergraduate training places increasing in 2016/17 by 100 compared to 2015/16. In total, there are 3,343 training places in universities across the country this year.

Most NHS organisations advertise their job and apprenticeship vacancies on NHS Jobs [20], including those who run NHS services. Some advertise on their own websites. You can find a list of NHS organisations at NHS Choices [21].

If you're applying for a role either directly in the NHS or in an organisation that provides NHS services, you'll be asked to show how you think the values of the NHS Constitution [22] apply in your everyday work. Find out more about NHS values [23].

- Further information

Expand / collapse

- Royal College of Nursing [24]
- Nursing and Midwifery Council [25]
- UCAS [26]

Other roles that may interest you

- Learning disability nurse [27]
- High intensity therapist [28]
- Social worker [29]
- Counselling psychologist [30]

Partner logos

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