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# PSYCHIATRIC TECHNICIANS (mental health aides, mental health specialists)

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## **Introduction**

Psychiatric technicians, also known as mental health aides or specialists, are unsung but vital members of the mental health care team.

## **Training**

Requirements for psych techs vary widely from state to state. Some states require only a high school diploma, whereas others require specific psych tech licensure. The American Association of Psychiatric Technicians is the main organization offering certifications, and there are four certificate levels, corresponding with increasing training requirements. The lowest level, level one, requires a high school diploma or GED, while the highest level, level 4, requires a Bachelor's degree in the mental health field plus at least three years of experience in a mental health setting. There are nearly 65,000 psychiatric technicians in the United States.

## **Duties**

To the uninitiated psychiatrists, psych techs may appear to be random staff members milling around. When we were new to inpatient work, we didn't know if they were nurses, custodians, or security staff. In some ways, psych techs are all of these things, plus being therapists. Duties include:

- Observation of patients throughout their shifts, and documentation of observations.
- Monitor patient safety, such as doing 15 minute checks.
- Help with ADLs, including dressing, toileting, and eating.
- Participate in restraints.
- Escort patients off the unit, such as for outdoor breaks or for 12 Step meetings.
- At the higher levels of training, they may take vital signs, write shift notes, and run therapeutic groups such as coping skills or mindfulness.
- Provide emotional support and counseling.

## **Collaborating effectively with psych techs**

Get to know the psych techs who are working with your patients--Don't underestimate them as "low level" staff. Many are actively pursuing further education in nursing, medicine, or related fields and choose to work in this setting for both experience and financial reasons. Make a point of asking psych techs about their impressions of your patients. They bring a unique perspective, often spending significant time engaging in casual conversations with patients, providing insights beyond clinical symptoms.