

Marriage and Family Therapy as a Career

Michael Simmons

Salt Lake Community College

Most everyone has heard the terms Marriage Counselor, Shrink, Therapist, and possibly a few others, all of which describe mental health professionals. In fact many of these professionals specialize in one aspect or clientele. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on the Marriage and Family Therapist, commonly known as the Marriage Counselor.

### **Job Description**

The Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT) is responsible for diagnosing and treating mental illnesses as well as distresses as they occur in a marriage or family (Cherry, 2014). The treatment of these conditions may include counseling which generally offered in different areas depending on the patient's needs. As a result of differing patient needs an MFT should be able and ready to deal with a number of conditions which may or may not be present in their day. These conditions may include but certainly are not limited to: self-esteem, anxiety, depression, self-harm, all of these in addition to the expected relationship problems.

In the event that the MFT is operating a private practice than the job description becomes much more involved than just seeing and treating patients. The additional duties of an ownership include the general day to day running of a business. Things such as managing, planning, scheduling, advertising, and procuring the necessary capital but real and financial to run the business then also fall on the MFT owner.

### **General Career Path & Education Experience**

Getting to be an MFT or in particular a private practice MFT appears to be fairly straight forward once you've met the requirements to be an MFT. To become a licensed MFT requires a minimum a master's degree in a mental health program and at least two additional years of supervised clinical experience (AAMFT, 2014). Some states may have more specific

requirements, for example in the state of Utah the Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing requires a certain number of credits in each of the following categories: Theoretical Foundations of Marital and Family Therapy, Assessment and Treatment In Marriage and Family Therapy, Human Development and Family Studies, Professional Ethics, Research Methodology and Data Analysis (State of Utah DOPL, 2014, p. 4). In addition to the above mentioned academic requirements Utah requires 600 hours of direct supervision. The educational proof of these requirements may be waived if the applicant graduated from a program accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) (State of Utah DOPL, 2014, p. 4).

Once an applicant has gained licensure the career path is up to the individual. If the goal is to own one's own practice than the steps may include working for another practice with the intent of purchasing it from the previous owners or possibly working to build a clientele and reputation for one's self. If owning the practice is not appealing or not desired there are many options within the field. As mentioned before an MFT could find employment with a presently established practice or work for an organization that employs MFTs like State social programs or even some religious groups such as LDS Family Services.

### **Average Salary**

The average salary of an MFT is dependent on a number of variables. Among these variables are the number of patients an MFT sees, the frequency with which the patient is seen, the method of payment (whether or not the MFT accepts insurance) and of course the length of each session with a patient. In addition to those the educational level of an MFT can play a significant role in the salary they receive.

One such example is Dr. Swinton of Swinton Counseling in Salt Lake City, Utah. Dr. Swinton recently received his PhD in MFT from Kansas State University and states that his motivation to getting a doctoral degree was largely financial. He noted that patients are more likely to seek out and select a therapist who is a doctor in the field than one who is not and he also mentioned that it allowed him to raise his rates about twenty percent (Swinton, 2014).

According to Kendra Cherry, “as of May 2011, the median annual salary for marriage and family therapists was \$46,240” (Cherry, 2014). This sounds low considering the amount of education that goes into this profession and based on the conversation with Dr. Swinton assuming full time therapy at full cost (2080 hours of therapy per year) a gross salary would be much closer if not well over six figures. Ms. Cherry does state that her figure is the median number or middle number from a sample and not actually an average of salaries from the sample or population. It is equally as likely that Dr. Swinton figures are gross for the Swinton Counseling and after accounting for overhead the actual salary is much less.

### **Career Outlook**

Searching for open positions of this type did not yield many results which would indicate that finding employment with another firm or practice may be difficult. Still there are opportunities as previously discussed to open a practice and still other private firms which may not publicly seek a therapist for their staff.

Reviewing the above information on education, experience, salary it would be easy for an individual to come to the conclusion that this career may not have the most optimistic future. Keep in mind those individuals who go into fields in the social sciences are generally motivated by factors other than money. Studies have indicated that there is a threshold where the

relationship between income and happiness becomes negative, meaning that as income rises happiness falls.

One of the major benefits of being an MFT is seeing firsthand the impact that you and your work have on your patients and their families. This intangible benefit is why, “68% of private practice MFTs reduce their fees based on an individual’s ability to pay” (AAMFT, 2014).

### **Pros and Cons**

One of the advantages of being an MFT, as previously mentioned, is the psychological benefit of knowing that your work has positive impacts on the lives of your patients. Another may be the potential salary. Depending on education, experience, and type of practice it is possible for MFTs to make decent money. Perhaps some of the greatest benefits, aside from making a difference, are applicable for those MFTs who own their own practice. Owning the practice enables the MFT to set their own rates and negotiate those rates as they see fit, set their own hours, and establish their own place of business and reputation. This amount of control and/or flexibility would provide an excellent foundation for the perfect work/life balance.

As for the outlook of the growth and need for MFTs the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) anticipates that “the employment of mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists is projected to grow about 29 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). This increase is expected in both the Mental Health Counselors and the Marriage and Family Therapists due to the increased number of insurance companies covering mental health services.

On the other hand becoming an MFT requires a significant amount of schooling and experience. It appears that there may not be much monetary gain from becoming an MFT and

there is significant competition in the market not only for employment but for patients as well. If the choice is made to own the practice then additional stresses are taken on like the day to day running of the business which may detract from the benefits of helping others.

Relocating as desired or necessary may become more difficult as an MFT as states may have different licensing requirements and may not recognize one another's licenses. In addition to the potential licensing issue there is the added concern of creating a name or reputation for your business. Moving away from your primary or current location to another state or even to another major city within your state (say, Salt Lake City to St. George) would likely require starting over with finding and retaining a new patient base and gaining that reputation.

### **My "Fit" With this Career**

Ever since my junior year of high school when I took my first psychology course I have loved psychology. Coupling that with people, be it friends, family, and yes even complete strangers, confiding in me and asking for counsel on various issues, though to my recollection the most common theme was relationships, gave me the desire to become a MFT. The impact that I would have as an MFT on my patient's lives would give me great pleasure. My current manager once asked me what motivates me to which I responded that I really enjoyed just helping people.

If the salary projections of the BLS are correct then the lifestyle that being an MFT would afford me is very similar to the one that I have now the most major change is that I would potentially be doing a great deal of good to society rather than merely contributing to the financial success of a major company.

From the psychological aspect people fascinate me. People watch is one of my favorite things to do. Everywhere I go take note of people, their behavior both conscious and what I perceive to be unconscious. To be able to marry this study of individuals, the knowledge and study of family and relationships and the ability to help people find happiness with each other or at least within themselves would be a great gift.

In short we've all been told to find something we love to do for "work". If we can accomplish that in life then "work" will not be as much work. I think that becoming an MFT is a step in the right direction for finding my balance and "work".

## Works Cited

AAMFT. (2014). *AAMFT: Therapy Topics*. Retrieved July 30, 2014, from American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy:

[https://www.aamft.org/iMIS15/AAMFT/Content/Consumer\\_Updates/Marriage\\_and\\_Family\\_Therapists.aspx](https://www.aamft.org/iMIS15/AAMFT/Content/Consumer_Updates/Marriage_and_Family_Therapists.aspx)

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2014, January 8). *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Retrieved July 30, 2014, from United States Department of Labor: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/mental-health-counselors-and-marriage-and-family-therapists.htm#tab-1>

Cherry, K. (2014). *Marriage and Family Therapist*. Retrieved July 30, 2014, from About.com Psychology: <http://psychology.about.com/od/psychologycareerprofiles/p/marriage-and-family-therapist.htm>

State of Utah DOPL. (2014). *Marriage and Family Therapist License Application*. Retrieved July 30, 2014, from Utah Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing: <http://www.dopl.utah.gov/apps/MFT.pdf>

Swinton, J. (2014, July 20). MFT: Insights for Up and Coming Therapists. (M. S. Simmons, Interviewer)