

Stephanie Pitt – clinical mental health counseling

Why did you choose your degree program?

I have worked as a registered licensed dietitian for nineteen years, educating, coaching, and empowering people to improve their physical well-being. Throughout this time, I realized that many people struggle with mental and emotional obstacles preventing them from achieving overall health and well-being. This realization created a strong interest and desire to return to graduate school to obtain a clinical mental health counseling degree and begin my journey toward becoming a licensed clinical professional counselor.

How has a clinical mental health counseling degree helped you grow personally and professionally?

Becoming a licensed mental health counselor is a long and arduous path that requires growing personally and professionally in many ways. Counselor training requires self-reflection and introspection, leading to individual growth and self-awareness. Counselors are people, too, and to be an effective counselor, one must fully understand themselves to help others. I also have encountered many challenges and perspectives during my counselor training, which have led to a deeper understanding of human behavior and the importance of demonstrating empathy, patience, and resilience when serving others.

Professionally, I have learned knowledge and skills for counseling practice. I have been exposed to different counseling techniques and strategies to handle various situations and populations. I have a greater understanding of counseling research, which allows me to follow evidence-based practices while also being a future researcher for advancing the counseling field.

What activities are you involved in at McKendree?

I have worked full-time while pursuing this degree, which left little time for me to be involved in additional activities on campus. I participated in the McKendree Mental Health Fair this February, operating the self-care table. Last year, I had a few opportunities to observe and assist first-year clinical mental health counseling students in learning and practicing their counseling skills. Both of these experiences I thoroughly enjoyed.

What are you most proud of accomplishing during your time at McKendree?

I am proud of several achievements. First, I am proud to have completed a rigorous program with extensive coursework and practical, hands-on experiences to make a positive difference in people's lives. It is an honor to offer my skills and knowledge to help people overcome personal challenges, promoting mental health and well-being. I am also proud of the relationships I have formed at McKendree and during my clinical internship. The students, teachers, counselors, and supervisors I have met throughout my training are some of the kindest, most intelligent, empathetic, and understanding people I know. They are not just my colleagues but also my

friends. It has been a pleasure getting to know each of them, and I look forward to continually seeing all their impactful and meaningful contributions to the counseling field.

If you could go back in time, what advice would you give your first-year self?

Patience. I must understand that counseling is a journey for clients and counselors. It will take me time to build experience and confidence. Self-care. I must take time for self-care. Counseling can be emotionally draining, and I need to recharge and maintain my well-being. Listen more, talk less. Active listening is one of the most critical skills in counseling. Be resilient. I will face complex cases and challenging moments during counselor training and practice. Always remember my resilience and why I chose to become a counselor: to serve and help others – and that I am making a difference in people's lives one step at a time.

Who helped you the most on your journey?

Many people supported me during this challenging three-year journey. My family and friends provided unwavering support, including the amazing counseling friends and peers I have made in the cohort. The professors at McKendree and my supervisor at my clinical internship site were vital in my professional and personal development. They shared experiences and provided constructive feedback to strengthen my counseling knowledge and skills. My interactions with clients during practicum and the clinical internship have provided valuable real-world insights and experiences into the life and role of mental health counseling.

What's next after graduation?

After graduation, I plan to work in community mental health while working toward my clinical licensure. After becoming a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC), I will continue practicing as a counselor while pursuing a Ph.D. in counseling to educate, train, and supervise future counselors.