

THE ROLE OF THE MENTAL STATUS EXAM IN CLIENT CARE

A one-hour course providing information
helpful to counselors, social workers,
marriage and family therapists and psychologists
in assessing and treating clients with
mental and emotional disorders

By

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THE ROLE OF THE MENTAL STATUS EXAM IN CLIENT CARE

Objectives:

At the conclusion of this lesson you will:

- Recognize the importance of the mental status exam
- Understand the purposes of the mental status exam in client care
- Be familiar with some practical approaches to this important part of diagnosis
- Know how to utilize the information this exam provides

A mental status examination is an important part of the assessment and diagnosis of mental and emotional disorders in anyone presenting for treatment. There are many forms of this exam to choose from but all have some similar components. The mental health professional responsible for making an accurate diagnosis needs to be sure the structure of the exam they are using captures the vital information necessary. The purpose of the various categories of information and the summary of their meaning with regards to the global functioning will be discussed and the usefulness of the information obtained in the mental status exam concerning indications for treatment and recommendations will be discussed.

THE MENTAL STATUS EXAM AS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE ASSESSMENT, DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL DISORDERS

A client presents for treatment and the clinician has the responsibility to make an accurate assessment and review of client needs and their ability to participate in the services offered. This involves not only the client's meaningful input but also requires the use of appropriate information gathering skills on the part of the therapist. The therapist has the clinical duty to diagnosis and plan for the client's treatment accordingly. This is often a difficult and challenging task because the client does not always know what information is important to provide to the therapist and the issue that brought them into counseling has them feeling chaotic and overwhelmed. This confusion and emotion felt by the client can take over the session if the clinician does not balance it with some good, open-ended questions and astute observations. In part, this can be led by the therapist's familiarity with a good mental status exam form.

While attending to the client the clinician must also observe things like their general appearance, behavior, and speech. They notice things in the same way a good detective takes in information that may be meaningful to the big picture. These types of information provide significant data in the assessment of client. It has been said, "Eighty percent of what we say, we say with our body." Not only is that true, but it is also a measure of disparity between what the counselor observes and what the client says. i.e., a client says, "I am feeling fine today." and the counselor sees the client twisting a tissue and fidgeting with the clasp on her purse. When the two things don't match, that is significant information.

The therapist must make value judgments about what they observe and hear regarding the client's mood and affect, their appropriateness, perceptions, thought content, attitude toward the examiner and life in general, as well as their thought processes, level of alertness and orientation, insight, memory, intelligence and judgment. A good mental status exam captures these types of information and helps the clinician form an accurate summary of the client's abilities and strengths and their need for treatment. This data also leads the professional in choosing other instruments of measuring the client's mental functioning. Knowing which tests to use to confirm or rule out a possible diagnosis is determined, in part, by the knowledge the clinician has already gained in a thorough mental status exam.

THE MENTAL STATUS EXAM HELPS THE HEALTH PROFESSIONAL IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Ohio Department of Mental Health (ODMH) requires that all agencies, Counselors, Social Workers and Marriage and Family Therapists funded by them adhere to Ohio Law and The Ohio Code of Ethics. A therapist has a professional responsibility to understand human behavior through objective assessment measures because their clinical actions and suggestions will have great impact on the life of their clients, the client's family and community and the profession at large.

Ohio Code of Ethical Practice and Professional Conduct

Section (F) Use of assessment and testing instruments Item (1)

(a) Appraisal techniques.

The primary purpose of educational and psychological assessment is to provide the measures that are objective and interpretable in either comparative or absolute terms. Counselors, social workers, and marriage and family therapists shall interpret the statements in this section as applying to the whole range of appraisal techniques, including test and non-test data.

The Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) requires that facilities it accredits adhere to state and national standards for care. With regard to assessment they say:

2006 Behavioral Health Standards Manual for CARF

Section 2. Item B. Screening and Access to Services

The process of screening and assessment is designed to maximize opportunities for the persons served to gain access to the organization's programs and services. Each person served is actively involved in, and has a significant role in, the assessment process.

Assessments are conducted in a manner that identifies the strengths, needs, abilities and preferences of each person served. Assessment data may be gathered through various means including face-to-face contact, telepsychiatry, or from external resources.

Most other professional organizations present similar requirements of the mental health professional.

ACA Code of Ethics Section E.1 General

a. Appraisal Techniques. The primary purpose of educational and psychological assessment is to provide measures that are objective and interpretable in either comparative or absolute terms. Counselors recognize the need to interpret the statement in this section as applying to the whole range of appraisal techniques, including test and non-test data.

**Code of Ethics of the American Mental Health Counselors Association
Principle 11 Professional Responsibility**

a. Mental health counselors accept ultimate responsibility for selecting appropriate areas for investigation and the methods relevant to minimize the possibility that their findings will be misleading.

**THE MENTAL STATUS EXAM HELPS THE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL
MAKE AN ACCURATE DIAGNOSIS**

A correct diagnosis is essential to client safety and client care. It guides the clinician in planning with the client the goals for therapy. The techniques and outcome measures used by the therapist all tie back to the diagnosis. Assessment drives diagnosis and diagnosis drives treatment. The following ethical codes address this issue:

**Ohio Code of Ethical Practice and Professional Conduct
Section (F) Item (5) Proper diagnosis of mental disorders**

a. Proper diagnosis: Counselors, social workers, and marriage and family therapists shall take special care to provide proper diagnosis of mental disorders. Assessment techniques (including personal interview) used to determine client care (e.g., locus of treatment, type of treatment or recommended follow-up) shall be carefully selected and appropriately used.

ACA Code of Ethics Section E.5 Proper Diagnosis of Mental Disorders

a. Proper Diagnosis. Counselors take special care to provide proper diagnosis of mental disorders. Assessment techniques (including personal interview) used to determine client care (e.g., locus of treatment, type of treatment, or recommended follow-up) are carefully selected and appropriately used.

**Code of Ethics of the American Mental Health Counselors Association
Principle 11 Professional Responsibility**

a. As practitioners, mental health counselors know that they bear a heavy social responsibility because their recommendations and professional actions may alter the lives of others.

THE MENTAL STATUS EXAM PROVIDES AN OVERVIEW OF THE NEEDS OF THE CLIENT

The client's needs are often complex and the urgent or immediate needs can mask other pressing needs. An example would be someone who presents with difficulty on their current job with a threat of loss of employment when they have a history of job losses for the past eighteen months. The mental status exam plays a major role in helping the clinician not only recognize the urgent needs of the client but also identify the underlying patterns of behavior that will cause ongoing or chronic problems for them.

An appropriate assessment clarifies the issues for the therapist and the client and helps pave the way for accuracy in diagnosis, treatment planning, evaluation of therapy and making necessary changes or referrals. There is no substitute for the face-to-face exam that is conducted through use of a mental status examination instrument and the wealth of information obtained when conducted properly. A thorough screening of all the data gathered in discussion, questioning, observing, and listening gives the therapist such a good overview of the client's needs.

THERE ARE MANY FORMS OF THE MENTAL STATUS EXAM

Whether the particular form selected is chosen or created by the mental health agency or the individual therapist, there are specific pieces of information that, when put together, form an accurate picture of the global functioning of the client. These pieces of information form a universal language meaningful to providers across numerous fields of client care.

Appearance	Cognitions	Attention
Posture	Level of Consciousness	Suggestibility
Body Movements	Attitude to Examiner	Judgment
Behavior	Appropriateness	Insight
Speech	Disassociation	Reliability
Mood & Affect	Agnosia	Summary
Perceptions	Orientation	
Thought form	Memory	
Thought content		

The clinical judgment of the practitioner comes into play in determining which mental status exam form will be used. In order to formulate a focus for further testing or to develop a diagnosis, the model chosen must capture the vital information necessary.

THE PURPOSE OF THE VARIOUS CATEGORIES AND GLOBAL FUNCTIONING

As previously stated, what a client says may not match up with the observed behavior. Just as one high blood pressure does not indicate hypertension, one aberration on a mental status exam does not indicate mental illness. The various pieces of information come together to form a whole picture of an individual and give a meaningful representation of the client.

This image of the client gives the therapist a more complete and accurate basis for making a diagnosis and planning care with the client. Also, if a referral is necessary to a psychiatrist, an inpatient setting, or another therapist, the information gathered on a good mental status exam provides important data written in a universal language.

The mental status exam done on intake with a client also becomes a baseline against which all future global functioning is measured. All changes in baseline functioning provide an indication of improvement or exacerbation of the presenting problems. The exam can also be very useful in determining prognosis for the client.

THE ROLE OF THE MENTAL STATUS EXAM IN CLIENT CARE

The mental status exam is, in essence, more than a snapshot of the client, if the therapist sees it as such. It is more like looking at a portfolio of a person's work in life and ability to function to their satisfaction and to cope with life's situations and problems. With the benefit of this tool, the therapist is 'looking into' the individual's life and making a determination about:

- The need for care
- The client's strengths
- The areas for potential growth
- The need for support
- The indications for treatment
- Possible diagnoses
- The role the client will be able to play in therapy

- Areas of focus for therapy
- The type of therapy to be used
- Prognosis

From the moment of intake, throughout the process of therapy, and through the time therapy with the client ends, the therapist must work with the information they have gathered to form meaningful plans to help the client. Each stage of counseling is influenced by the data the client and the counselor have learned.

The mental status exam is only a part of the process of gaining information and insight but it is an extremely important part. It shapes and molds the attitude of the therapist in many ways. The initial information gathered is influential in that it guides and directs the therapist much like the information from a preliminary medical exam guides a physician in diagnosing and treating a patient. The mental health therapist ultimately uses everything they learn from that opening encounter with the client.

Whatever format is used for a good mental status exam, it is the clinician's attitude toward it and their recognition of its primary function in assessing, diagnosing, and treating clients that really matters. If it is seen as just another piece of paperwork to be completed and signed off on, then its meaning is lost. If, however, it is seen as the important and useful tool that it is then much will be accomplished with its use.

REFERENCES

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The Role of the Mental Status Exam in Client Care

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THE ROLE OF THE MENTAL STATUS EXAM IN CLIENT CARE

POST TEST QUESTIONNAIRE

1. It can be difficult to make an accurate assessment of a client because:
 - a. the client deliberately throws the counselor off in order to test their diagnostic abilities.
 - b. the client does not always know what information is important to provide to the therapist and the issue that brought them into counseling has them feeling chaotic and overwhelmed.
 - c. their problems are so numerous and insurmountable they are too complicated for the therapist to figure out.
 - d. the therapist does not always have the necessary tools to make an accurate assessment.

2. A mental status exam is useful in:
 - a. making an accurate diagnosis of the client
 - b. determining the global functioning of the client
 - c. providing indications for treatment
 - d. All of the above

3. A good mental status exam is helpful:
 - a. as test data
 - b. only if adheres to one format
 - c. in guiding the therapist in their professional responsibility
 - d. None of the above

4. Mental Status Exams according to CARF standards:
 - a. should maximize opportunities for the persons served to gain access to the organization's programs and services.
 - b. are organization specific.
 - c. are conducted in a manner that identifies the strengths, needs, abilities and preferences of each person served.
 - d. Both a. and c.

5. The form the mental status exam takes:
 - a. must contain specific types of information that, when put together, form an accurate picture of the global functioning of the client.
 - b. is very important so it must be the same with all agencies.
 - c. does not include specific types of information but is specific to agency guidelines.
 - d. Is determined by governing bodies like ODMH, CARF, Ohio Code of Ethics.

6. One thing the typical mental status exam does for therapists is:
- a. provide the sole basis for diagnosis and treatment.
 - b. provide important data written in a universal language.
 - c. with one aberration, provide a basis for a mental illness diagnosis.
 - d. None of the above.

7. A mental status exam indicates:
- a. a client's need for support and care, and the role they will play in their therapy.
 - b. a client's strengths and areas for potential growth.
 - c. a possible diagnosis and indications for treatment.
 - d. All of the above.

TRUE OR FALSE

8. ___T ___F A therapist's attitude toward the mental status exam is primary in the exam's usefulness to therapy.
9. ___T ___F Agnosia and Disassociation are two potential types of information that could be included on a mental status exam.
10. ___T ___F The mental status exam provides the therapist with meaningful information for planning client care.
11. ___T ___F There is one specific form of mental status exam that is best above all others.
12. ___T ___F A mental status exam is really just one more piece of paper to be completed and signed off on by the therapist.
13. ___T ___F A mental status exam is an important part of the assessment and diagnosis of mental and emotional disorders in anyone presenting for treatment.

I, _____ (name of participant) affirm that I am the person who completed this home study and am responsible for this post test.

Signature: _____

