

When is psychological assessment needed?

The following general guidelines identify when psychological assessments are likely to offer the greatest benefit.

Pretreatment evaluation. Often the goal of a pretreatment assessment is to describe current functioning, confirm or refute clinical impressions, identify treatment needs, suggest appropriate treatments, or aid in careful diagnosis. Pretreatment assessment is likely to yield the greatest overall benefit for clients when (a) there are a variety of treatment approaches to choose from and there is a body of knowledge linking treatment methods to patient characteristics, (b) the client has had limited success in prior treatment, or (c) the client has complex problems calling for treatment goals to be prioritized.

Evaluation of outcomes. Because clients may have difficulty describing changes in their functioning over time, evaluation of treatment outcomes supplements the client's subjective reports with formal measures of current functioning. Psychological test data gathered at the beginning, end, and at various points throughout the treatment can accurately measure progress and treatment effectiveness.

Stalled treatment. When treatment efforts have stalled, psychological assessment may be used to review and modify treatment plans. Psychological assessment can identify the factors impeding therapeutic progress.

Brief treatment. When clients are in great emotional distress but are reluctant or unable to engage in more lengthy treatments, psychological assessment approaches called Therapeutic Assessment or Collaborative Assessment can serve as a very effective brief therapy. These treatment models have been shown to decrease distressing symptoms, restore hope, and increase cooperation with other treatment. In settings where treatment demands are high and professional resources are limited, psychological assessment can be an efficient and effective form of brief therapy.

Referral questions. When decisions and plans need to be made about clients based in part on their psychological functioning, psychological assessment can offer referring agencies objective information that contributes to more personalized and rational planning and decision-making.

Generally, assessment is appropriate when there is a clinical rationale for using specific assessment instruments to address a specific set of referral questions about a particular client under a unique set of circumstances.

How can a client prepare for psychological assessment?

There are a number of web sites on the internet that offer free "advice" about how to fake psychological tests, sometimes with the purpose of steering the test results one way or another. We have never found a web site that gives good or valid advice and sometimes it is very bad advice. We recommend that clients just be themselves while taking the tests.

If possible, the client should arrive at the testing site well rested. Because troubling situations sometimes surround getting a psychological assessment, there may be no way to put such concerns aside. Simply telling the psychologist about them would help give a better understanding of the situation the client is dealing with. In turn, that information will contribute to more valid testing. Similarly, a client should report their use of drugs or alcohol so that their effects can be taken into account or testing can be postponed if necessary.

It can be helpful for clients to be curious about themselves and to express what they and others would like to get from the assessment. When the assessment findings are presented, it is helpful for clients to collaborate in the interpretation of the information and to share their reactions with the psychologist.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT



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What is psychological assessment?

Psychological assessment refers to scientific methods psychologists often use to understand the human personality. When combined with information from interviews, observations, and other sources, assessment can help clients explore new and more effective ways of resolving human problems.

After assessment procedures are completed and the results are obtained, the psychologist typically gives clients feedback about the results. The purpose is to promote greater self-understanding and more ability to help plan appropriate treatment. In this way, psychological assessment can shorten treatment and reduce its cost when compared to treatment based solely on a clinical interview. Psychological assessment also can provide accurate and objective information to help answer questions posed by other health professionals and referring agencies such as school systems, the court, and social agencies.

What does psychological assessment provide that typical interviews do not?

In comparison with interviews, psychological assessment can:

- provide a more objective yardstick to measure personal characteristics.
- provide important treatment-related information that may be difficult for the client to express directly in interviews.
- provide reliable and valid information about the client based on comparisons with research data gathered from large groups of people.

- measure a large number of personality, cognitive, or neuropsychological characteristics simultaneously and efficiently.
- offer information from a wide range of sources, including self reports, performance tasks, and other assessment strategies.
- provide essential information needed at the start of or early in treatment.
- guide the selection of appropriate treatment methods, particularly for clients who have not sufficiently benefited from previous treatment or whose treatment needs are complex.
- highlight potential obstacles in treatment and suggest alternatives.
- identify client strengths that can be used to facilitate and speed treatment.
- clarify the goals and focus of treatment.
- provide a baseline to measure the progress of treatment and to evaluate the effects of treatment.
- serve as a kind of “outside opinion” that informs both client and healthcare professional in their planning for and reassessment of treatment.
- give the client information to enable more confident and active participation in treatment decisions, thereby increasing the client’s sense of independence and satisfaction.

Who provides psychological assessment?

Psychologists and many other health care providers engage in assessment. The competent practice of psychological assessment requires much more than a passing familiarity with specific psychological tests, as is true with many other health care tools. Because the education and training of health care professionals vary widely, they offer a wide range of competence to evaluate, diagnose, intervene, and apply findings from research. Competent providers must have advanced education and supervised training in psychological assessment to fully develop their expertise.

Because psychological assessment is one of the psychologist’s most important tools, psychologists’ training in assessment is unique among health care providers. During their doctoral level training, psychologists learn to not only select, administer, score, and interpret psychological tests, but also to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the individual and to integrate test results with research, theory, cultural and background information, and behavioral observations. This comprehensive, integrative training enables psychologists to report sensitive psychological assessment information to clients in a way that is clear and helpful.

Society for Personality Assessment
6109H Arlington Boulevard
Falls Church, VA 22044
703-534-4772
manager@spaonline.org
www.personality.org