

Assessment, Case Conceptualization, Diagnosis, and Treatment Planning Overview

■The abilities to gather and interpret information, apply counseling and developmental theories, understand diagnostic frameworks, and engage in collaborative treatment planning are all important parts of the counseling process.

Concepts

■**Assessment** is a broad term that includes many structured and unstructured processes for gathering information to understand the issues that bring people to counseling.

■**Case conceptualization** refers to how professional counselors understand the nature of clients' concerns, how and why the problems developed, and the types of counseling interventions that might be helpful.

■**Diagnosis** is the identification of a problem which becomes the target of the counseling intervention.

■**Treatment planning** provides a road map for the counseling process.

■Treatment plans identify what the professional counselor and client are going to work on together and what strategies will be used to achieve these goals

Assessment

■**Assessment** is the process of gathering information in a systematic way to evaluate concerns or questions that a client brings to counseling.

■Assessment includes:

■Intake interviews

■Tests and inventories

■Behavioral observations

■Relevant information gathered from other sources

Assessment

■The assessment process informs diagnostic formulation and counseling plans, and helps to identify resources that could help the client better cope with the presenting concern.

■Determining what information to gather is an important assessment skill

Testing and the Counseling Profession

■The terms testing and assessment are often used interchangeably; however, testing is only one type of assessment tool.

■It is important that counselors:

■Are sensitive to the appropriate use of tests and vigilant about discriminatory practices in testing

■Are attentive to cultural biases in tests and only use tests with norms developed on a sample that is representative of the test taker

■Are sensitive to an over interpretation of test results, understanding that a test provides a limited sample of behavior

■Ensure that test results are not used to unfairly disadvantage the test taker

Testing and the Counseling Profession

■The use of some tests is regulated by test makers and the purchase of these regulated tests requires advanced levels of education and training.

- Tests are often categorized by publishers as level A, B, or C.
- **Level A** tests are those that require no special training to purchase and administer
- **Level B** tests require a master's degree, relevant testing coursework and supervision in the use of the test
- **Level C** tests require a doctorate or a license with a scope of practice to interpret these tests and training and supervision in the use of the instrument

Categories of Tests

- Tests are often categorized as:
 - Standardized or nonstandardized
 - Norm-referenced or criterion-referenced
 - Cognitive or affective

Standardized Tests

- **Standardized tests** have defined protocols for administration and scoring.
- The test is administered in the same way, under similar conditions whenever it is administered
- The methods used for scoring the test are predetermined and are followed consistently.
- Scores from a standardized test are interpreted in relationship to either a norm group (i.e., a group of people that are similar to the test takers in such dimensions as age, gender, grade) or are measured against some performance criteria
- Norms and criteria used for scoring standardized tests are developed through extensive test administration and statistical analysis

Nonstandardized Tests

- **Nonstandardized tests** do not have defined administration protocols and have not been extensively studied to create norms or criterion-related scoring protocols.

Norm-Referenced Tests

- When scores on a test are compared to the scores of a group of people with similar characteristics to the examinee who took the same test, the test is considered a **norm-referenced test**.
- That comparison yields a derived score (standardized score or percentile rank) that places individual scores in relationship to the test norms

Criterion-Referenced Tests

- When you take a test and the score is based on performance criteria, you are taking a **criterion-referenced test**.
- Your score will likely reflect the number of items answered correctly and some criterion, such as a grade or percentage score, will be agreed upon

Cognitive Tests

- Cognitive tests include intelligence tests, other aptitude tests, and achievement tests.
- **Intelligence tests** are designed as broad measures of cognitive ability.
- While there is ongoing controversy regarding the validity of the constructs that underlie intelligence tests (for example, is general intelligence a useful concept?), it is essential that professional school counselors be familiar with these tests

- Intelligence tests are correlated to academic achievement and are often used to make educational planning or screening decisions

- Intelligence tests are considered to be one type of **aptitude test**.

- However, aptitude tests also measure a broad range of more specific cognitive abilities or the ability to master particular skill sets.

- Aptitude tests are often used to help students understand personal strengths and challenges, and by employers to help in the hiring process

- **Achievement tests** are typically used in educational settings and are designed to measure student learning.

- Individual achievement tests that measure specific areas of achievement (such as reading or math) are used diagnostically by learning disability specialists and school psychologists

Affective Tests

- **Affective tests** include:

- Personality inventories

- Interest inventories

- Symptom checklists

- They are used for the screening and diagnosis of clinical issues.

- **Personality tests** and **personality inventories** are designed to measure personality traits, temperament, and levels of pathology. These tests are categorized as objective or projective.

- **Objective personality tests** are paper and pencil tests that require examinees to answer questions in specific ways (such as multiple choice) and can be easily scored

- **Projective personality tests** provide examinees with ambiguous tasks and examinees' answers can be quite varied

- **Symptom checklists** measure the presence and intensity of symptoms associated with various problems or disorders.

- While a diagnosis should not be made solely on endorsed items in a symptom checklist, they are valuable assessment tools

- They are also used to monitor the effect of treatment on symptom reduction

Qualities to Consider When Evaluating Tests

- There are several qualities that help professional counselors decide if a test is a useful tool to administer and how much consideration to give to a test score:

- Is this test accessible?

- Is the test psychometrically acceptable?

- Is this test clinically useful?

- Is the test appropriate for client use?

- It would be important for the professional counselor to know the reliability and validity of scores derived by the inventory.

- Validity** refers to how well a test measures what it is intended to measure

- Reliability** refers to the consistency of scores the test provides

Types of Validity

- In classical test theory, score validity is frequently described as three types: content validity, criterion-related validity, and construct validity.

- Content validity** refers to how well test questions represent the domain being tested.

- Content validity frequently is determined by experts in the content areas covered by the test

- Criterion-related validity** refers to the correlation between a test or inventory and another measure (the criterion) that is closely associated with what the test is intended to measure.

- There are two types of criterion-related validity:

- Criterion-related validity is **concurrent** when both measures (i.e., the test and criterion) exist at the same point in time

- It is **predictive** when the closely associated measure (i.e., the criterion) will be available in the future

- Construct validity** refers to how effectively a test measures the construct (e.g., intelligence, depression, anxiety) it is intended to measure.

- Convergent validity** refers to the correlation between a test and other measures of a similar construct

- Divergent validity** is the lack of significant correlation between test scores and measures of constructs that are unrelated to the test construct

Reliability

- Reliability** refers to the consistency of testing scores.

- A test can not be valid unless it is reliable; however, a test could be reliable and yet not be valid.

- The purpose of reliability measures is to determine the degree to which a test is free from errors that would cause test scores to vary for random reasons.

- Reliability can be:

- The correlation between test scores when the test is administered at different times (test-retest reliability)

- The correlation between scores on two similar versions of a test (alternate forms reliability)

- The correlation between items within the test itself (split-half reliability or internal consistency)

Ethical Considerations

- When selecting, using and interpreting tests, it is important to consider the following questions:
 - What does the client want (autonomy)?
 - How will the test or test battery be helpful to the client (beneficence)?
 - How could the testing process be harmful to the client (nonmaleficence)?
 - Is the test a fair measurement tool for the client (justice)?
 - Are you working in the client's best interests when you use tests in counseling (fidelity)?

Intake Interviews

- While testing is one form of assessment, the counseling interview is a hallmark of the counseling process.
- The formality and the content of the intake interview will be determined by the context in which the interview occurs

- The **intake interview** has three prime objectives:
 - Identifying, evaluating and exploring the client's chief complaint and associated counseling goals
 - Obtaining a sense of the client's interpersonal style, interpersonal skills, and personal history
 - Evaluating the client's current life situation and functioning

Mental Status Exam

- A **mental status exam** is a general assessment of primary mental systems, serving in a similar capacity to how a physician's general medical examination covers the major body physical systems.

- A mental status exam includes consideration of the following categories:
 - Appearance and behavior
 - Speech patterns
 - Thought process
 - Mood and affect
 - Intellectual functioning
 - Sensorium
 - Judgment
 - Insight
 - Reliability

Behavioral Observation

- **Behavioral observations** are done in a natural setting in which the client is experiencing the difficulties that precipitated counseling.
- The purpose of the behavioral observation is to note the frequency of behaviors that are the focus of concern, to notice what precedes these behaviors, and to identify what consequences follow these behaviors.

Environmental Assessment

- An **environmental assessment** involves a holistic evaluation of the client within his environment.

- Important factors to consider:
 - Physical space
 - Organization and supervision of space
 - Materials
 - Peer environment
 - Safety
 - Responsiveness

Case Conceptualization

■ **Case conceptualization** refers to the way that professional counselors make meaning out of the information they have gathered.

■ Formulating a case conceptualization involves:

■ Identifying patterns and themes associated with the information gathered during the assessment phases

■ Applying a theory

■ Considering how issues such as race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, family structure, trauma and/or sexual and gender orientation impact a client's presenting concerns

■ Assessing a client's motivation for counseling

■ There are five stages of **readiness for change**: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance.

■ **Precontemplation**: Clients come to counseling because other people say they need to make a change but they are not interested in change or are not ready to do so

■ **Contemplation**: Clients who are thinking about the benefits of change but not ready to make any commitment to change

■ **Preparation**: Clients who have made a commitment to change in the very near future and have begun making minor behavioral changes

■ **Action**: Client's who are in the process of practicing the desired changes

■ **Maintenance**: Clients consider the best ways to ensure that the habits of change continue and develop strategies to deal effectively with relapses

Diagnosis

■ **Diagnosis** is the identification of a disease, disorder, or syndrome based on some form of systematic assessment.

■ The most common diagnostic system that professional counselors will use is the DSM IV-TR.

■ Licensed professional counselors are allowed to provide diagnostic assessments in most states

■ Whether licensed or not, it is necessary for professional counselors to be familiar with DSM diagnostic codes and to consider the implications of a client's diagnosis during the counseling process

■ DSM-IV-TR uses a descriptive model, meaning that there is an effort to be atheoretical (earlier versions of the DSM were heavily influenced by psychoanalytic thought) and to consider current symptoms and functional impairments as the basis of a diagnosis.

■ The DSM-IV-TR uses a **multi-axial system** which provides a richer diagnostic picture than earlier DSM systems.

- **Axis I** includes **clinical disorders** and **nonclinical disorders** that are the focus of treatment
- **Axis II** disorders include **personality disorders** and **mental retardation**
- **Axis III** is used to code existing **medical conditions** that are relevant to diagnosis and treatment
- **Axis IV** is used to record **psychosocial** and **environmental stressors**
- **Axis V** is used to record the **Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF)**; the GAF score considers symptom intensity and functional impairment (the ability to perform expected life tasks)

■ **Benefits** of diagnosis include providing:

- A common language for professionals and clients to describe disorders or problems
- A framework that aids in treatment planning and facilitates insurance reimbursement for services
- A classification system that facilitates clinical research and helps to determine what treatments are most effective with what types of problems
- A framework to help clients understand the problems that they bring to counseling
- A classification system that helps clients find support networks with people sharing similar problems

■ **Problems** associated with diagnosis include:

- Identifying clients by their diagnosis as opposed to focusing on their unique situations and experiences
- Limiting counseling to address only pathology
- Misdiagnosis
- Biases that tend to pathologize minority clients
- Stigmatization that can impede a client's ability to get health and disability insurance and may interfere with the possibilities of some types of employment

Treatment Planning

- A good **treatment plan** requires an assessment appropriate to the client's presenting concerns and a case conceptualization that includes an understanding of what the problem is, how it developed, and how to deal with the problem.
- The formality of a treatment plan and the actual form that it takes varies from setting to setting.
- A counselor should always be able to answer the question, "What are you trying to accomplish?"

■ The format of a **treatment plan** will depend on the setting in which you work.

- A **three tiered system** is a treatment plan that outlines goals, objectives and interventions or strategies.
- **Goals** are broad statements of desired outcomes
- **Objectives** are statements of observable and measurable outcome targets
- **Interventions** are counseling strategies designed to meet the above objectives
- For each counseling goal, objectives are identified that will help the client reach the goal. For each objective, strategies are identified that will help the client reach the objective.