

## Comprehensive Assessment: It's Not Just the Tool, It's the Process

Comprehensive assessment is a process of understanding interactions between mental health and addiction challenges. It is inclusive of all strengths and problems that people bring through our doors. Our interactions may be simultaneous, dynamic, and fluid, and change over time. The art of assessment is to gather the needed information while engaging the person and building rapport.

### Assessment must be purposeful

#### A practical approach to assessment

- There is no wrong door to access services. Whether the person has a mental health concern, a substance use concern, or both, we will help.
- We will address mental health concerns and substance use simultaneously.
- Keep and consult unless it is necessary to refer out to provide continuity of care.
- Coordinate and collaborate with other services to provide the most appropriate care for the person.

Assessment begins at earliest contact and is ongoing. It involves getting to know the person and building a therapeutic relationship. Comprehensive assessment is a process of continual information gathering and responsiveness, which includes the person and other active participants (such as family). Recovery for one disorder may impact another area of a person's life, which must be taken into account.

In addition:

- Comprehensive assessment helps place people into appropriate tiers of service or indicate when a warm hand-off is needed.
- Assessment data provides before and after information that determines whether change has occurred as a response to treatment.

Your role may include:

- Focusing on goals and strengths
- Providing acknowledgement and support
- Being empathetic
- Providing a listening ear
- Finding hope
- Empowering the person and facilitating change
- Providing resources

### Multiple methods of assessment

You can use multiple methods to accurately and comprehensively assess someone's situation, needs, and goals. These may include:

- Clinical examinations of functioning and wellbeing
- In-depth interviews
- Standardized/specialized tests
- Social/treatment history
- Review of records
- Physical examinations
- Lab tests
- Collateral information from friends and family

### What to assess

- Safety
- Reason for coming
- Substance use
- Mental health
- Interaction of concurrent disorders
- Medical concerns
- Stage of change/motivation
- Cultural and linguistic needs
- Environment and social supports
- Strengths
- Personal background

## Benefits of assessment

Comprehensive assessment has many benefits, including:

- Improved personal outcomes
- Improved follow-through
- Better match to appropriate treatment
- Improved person satisfaction
- Earlier intervention
- Better use of valuable resources
- Better organizational planning
- Common language and increased cooperation between systems

## Interpersonal factors

Interpersonal factors can greatly affect assessment. To assess more effectively:

- Use a person-centred approach.
- Be empathetic.
- Consider motivation and treatment readiness.
- Identify strengths and supports.
- Be sensitive to cultural needs.
- Provide trauma informed care.

## Tips for assessment

- Assess the interaction or relationship between mental health and substance use conditions.
- Focus on the four Ds (deficits, diagnosis, dysfunction, and delinquencies) and how these may negatively affect treatment outcomes.
- Focus on strengths, hope, and expectancy.
- Express empathy and caring.
- Acknowledge and validate the person's experience and disclosure.
- Assure confidentiality and address time limitations to avoid surprises.
- Build a foundation of safety, comfort, support, rapport, trust, and confidentiality.
- Strive to understand the person's perceptions of their difficulties, in their language.
- Be up-front and transparent, understanding where the person is in their own stage of change and motivation.

## Suggested activity

Spend a few moments, either alone or with a colleague, to explore challenges and solutions to comprehensive assessment that you or your team may face in your work.

Brainstorm impacts and strategies for the following:

- Failure to take a proper history
- Accuracy of self-reported use and symptoms
- Pre-motivational states
- Different norms for substance use disorders
- Clinician resistance
- System barriers (identify specific challenges)
- Sorting out the interaction effects
- Primary vs. secondary issues