Understanding Clinical and Forensic Evaluations

This handout explains common psychological, diagnostic, comprehensive, and forensic evaluations; how they differ in purpose and scope; and how insurance and the legal system generally treat them. The appropriate type of evaluation depends primarily on the referral question and the intended use of the findings. An evaluation conducted for treatment purposes is fundamentally different from an evaluation conducted to answer a legal question.

Clinical Evaluations (Treatment-Oriented)

Clinicians conduct clinical evaluations for diagnosis, treatment planning, recommendations, accommodations, and ongoing care. In these evaluations, the individual being evaluated is the patient. Confidentiality applies with standard clinical exceptions, and findings are intended primarily to guide healthcare, educational, or supportive services rather than answer a legal question. Many clinical evaluations may be eligible for insurance reimbursement when medical-necessity and coverage requirements are met.

Diagnostic Assessment

A diagnostic assessment is a focused **clinical evaluation** used to determine whether an individual meets criteria for one or more mental health diagnoses. It typically includes a clinical interview, review of relevant history, mental status examination, and symptom-based measures rather than extensive psychological testing.

Clinicians commonly use diagnostic assessments to establish diagnoses, guide treatment, support referrals, and meet insurance or service-eligibility requirements. They are generally **less comprehensive** than formal psychological testing.

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Comprehensive Psychological Evaluation / Psychological Assessment

A psychological evaluation provides a **more comprehensive assessment** of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, personality, developmental, and/or social functioning. The scope depends upon the referral question.

A comprehensive evaluation may include standardized psychological tests, clinical and developmental interviews, behavioral observations, symptom and personality measures, cognitive testing, record review, and collateral information from caregivers, teachers, treatment providers, or other relevant sources.

These evaluations may be used for diagnostic clarification, treatment planning, disability-related recommendations, educational accommodations, and understanding complex clinical presentations.

Autism Spectrum Disorder Evaluation

An Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) evaluation examines whether an individual's developmental history, social communication, patterns of behavior, sensory experiences, restricted or repetitive interests and behaviors, and functional presentation are consistent with autism spectrum disorder.

Depending upon age and clinical presentation, the evaluation may include developmental history, interviews with the individual and caregivers, standardized autism-specific measures, direct behavioral assessment, adaptive functioning measures, cognitive testing, collateral information, and assessment of co-occurring conditions.

A comprehensive autism evaluation also considers alternative and co-occurring explanations for the individual's presentation, including ADHD, anxiety, trauma-related disorders, intellectual or learning disorders, language or communication difficulties, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and other psychiatric conditions.

Autism evaluations may be completed with children, adolescents, or adults. Adult evaluations frequently require careful reconstruction of developmental history because

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symptoms may have been masked, compensated for, or previously attributed to another condition.

ADHD Evaluation

An ADHD evaluation examines persistent difficulties involving attention regulation, executive functioning, organization, working memory, activity level, impulse control, and related functional impairment.

Because ADHD is a developmental disorder, evaluation includes assessment of symptom history and functioning across time and settings rather than relying solely on current symptoms or a computerized attention test.

A comprehensive ADHD evaluation may include clinical and developmental interviews, standardized self-report and collateral rating scales, cognitive or executive-functioning measures, performance-based attention measures when indicated, educational or occupational history, and assessment of alternative explanations for attentional difficulties.

Conditions such as anxiety, depression, trauma, sleep disorders, autism, substance use, medical conditions, and learning disorders may produce symptoms that resemble or compound ADHD and therefore may require evaluation.

Differential Diagnosis / Diagnostic Clarification Evaluation

A differential diagnosis evaluation is used when the primary question is not simply whether an individual meets criteria for one disorder, but **which diagnosis or combination of diagnoses best explains the individual's presentation**.

These evaluations are particularly useful when symptoms overlap across multiple conditions or when an individual has received conflicting diagnoses.

Referral questions may involve differentiation among conditions such as:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder and ADHD

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- ADHD and anxiety or mood disorders
- Autism and trauma-related conditions
- PTSD and other trauma-related disorders
- Trauma-related symptoms and dissociation
- Bipolar disorders and ADHD
- Autism and personality disorders
- Personality pathology and trauma-related adaptations
- Obsessive-compulsive symptoms and autism-related repetitive behavior
- Cognitive or learning disorders and attention problems
- Genuine psychiatric symptoms and exaggerated or inconsistent symptom reporting

The evaluation is individualized to the diagnostic question and may include psychological testing, personality assessment, developmental history, trauma and dissociation measures, cognitive assessment, symptom-validity measures, collateral information, and record review.

The purpose is **not merely to assign diagnoses**, but to **determine which diagnostic formulation is best supported** by the totality of the available data.

Neuropsychological Evaluation

A neuropsychological evaluation is a specialized and in-depth assessment of **brain-behavior functioning**. It examines how neurological, developmental, medical, or acquired conditions affect cognition, behavior, emotion, and daily functioning.

Testing may assess attention, memory, executive functioning, language, processing speed, visuospatial functioning, motor abilities, and other cognitive domains.

Neuropsychological evaluation may be particularly relevant when questions involve traumatic brain injury, neurological disease, seizures, cognitive decline, complex developmental conditions, or other circumstances in which detailed characterization of cognitive functioning is required.

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Psychiatric Assessment

A psychiatric assessment is a medical evaluation conducted by a **psychiatrist** or other qualified **medical provider**. Its primary focus is psychiatric diagnosis from a medical perspective, medication management, and identification of possible medical contributors to psychiatric symptoms.

Psychiatric assessments emphasize psychiatric and medical history, medication response, current symptoms, and differential diagnosis. They generally do not involve the extensive standardized cognitive, personality, or performance-based testing associated with psychological or neuropsychological assessment.

Forensic Evaluations (Legal-Oriented)

Forensic evaluations are conducted to answer questions arising within a legal, administrative, employment, or other adjudicative context rather than primarily to provide treatment.

The retaining attorney, court, agency, employer, or other authorized referral source may define the referral question and scope of the evaluation. **Confidentiality and privilege differ substantially from psychotherapy**, and examinees are informed of the purpose of the evaluation and applicable limits on confidentiality.

The evaluator's role is neutral and objective. The evaluator **does not function** as the examinee's therapist or advocate. The purpose is to provide an opinion supported by sufficient psychological data and relevant records within the evaluator's professional expertise.

Forensic evaluations are generally **not eligible for health-insurance reimbursement** because they are performed for legal or administrative purposes rather than medical treatment.

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General Forensic Psychological Evaluation

A general forensic psychological evaluation addresses a **specifically defined psychological question r**elevant to a legal proceeding.

Depending upon the referral question, the evaluation may include clinical and forensic interviews, psychological testing, personality assessment, cognitive testing, response-validity or symptom-validity assessment, extensive record review, collateral interviews, and review of legal materials.

The scope is determined by the legal question rather than by a standard testing battery.

Competency to Stand Trial Evaluation

A competency evaluation addresses an individual's **current ability to participate meaningfully** in criminal proceedings.

The evaluation generally examines whether the defendant has sufficient present ability to understand the nature and purpose of the proceedings and to assist counsel in the defense, applying the applicable jurisdictional legal standard.

Competency is **distinct from diagnosis**. An individual may have a serious mental disorder and remain competent, while another individual's psychiatric or cognitive impairment may substantially interfere with legally relevant abilities.

Competency also **differs from criminal responsibility** because competency concerns the person's functioning during the legal proceedings, rather than mental state at the time of the alleged offense.

Criminal Responsibility / Mental State at the Time of the Offense

A criminal responsibility evaluation examines an individual's mental condition **at the time of an alleged offense** and whether that condition is relevant under the jurisdiction's legal standard for criminal responsibility.

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This requires retrospective assessment and may involve extensive review of police reports, witness statements, medical and psychiatric records, recordings, prior evaluations, substance-use information, and other contemporaneous evidence.

The presence of a mental illness **does not by itself** establish a legal defense. The forensic question concerns the relationship between the individual's mental condition and the specific legal standard applicable to the alleged conduct.

Violence / Dangerousness Risk Assessment

A violence risk assessment evaluates factors associated with the likelihood of future violent or aggressive behavior.

These evaluations may be requested in criminal proceedings, civil matters, employment or fitness-for-duty cases, threat-assessment situations, release or supervision decisions, and other contexts involving safety concerns.

Assessment may include structured or structured-professional-judgment risk instruments, psychological testing, clinical interview, historical information, records, collateral information, current risk factors, protective factors, and circumstances that may increase or decrease risk.

A risk assessment estimates risk under defined circumstances; it **does not predict with certainty** whether a person will or will not engage in future violence.

Psychosexual / Sexual Behavior Risk Evaluation

A psychosexual evaluation examines sexual development, sexual interests and behavior, psychosocial functioning, relevant psychiatric factors, risk variables, and treatment or supervision considerations.

These evaluations may be requested in cases involving alleged or adjudicated sexual offenses, problematic sexual behavior, supervision decisions, treatment planning within a forensic context, or assessment of sexual recidivism risk.

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The specific procedures depend on the referral question and the examinee's age and legal status.

Child Custody / Best-Interests Evaluation

A child custody evaluation is a **comprehensive forensic family evaluation** intended to assist the court with decisions involving custody, parenting time, placement, or other issues affecting the parent-child relationship.

These evaluations typically involve assessment of **multiple family members** rather than one parent in isolation. The evaluator considers the child's needs, each parent's functioning and parenting capacities, parent-child relationships, family dynamics, developmental considerations, safety concerns, and other factors relevant under the applicable best-interests standard.

Custody evaluations may include parent and child interviews, psychological testing, parent-child observations, collateral interviews, and extensive review of educational, medical, mental health, legal, and other relevant records.

Parental Capacity / Parental Fitness Evaluation

A parental capacity evaluation is **narrower** than a comprehensive child custody evaluation. It examines a **particular caregiver's** psychological functioning and demonstrated capacity to meet a child's emotional, physical, developmental, educational, medical, and safety needs.

Areas assessed may include judgment, emotional regulation, insight, stability, supervision, understanding of the child's needs, responsiveness to the child's cues, ability to provide structure and consistency, and the effect of psychiatric, cognitive, substance-related, or other concerns on parenting.

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A parental capacity evaluation of one parent **does not ordinarily** provide sufficient information to determine an entire custody arrangement or compare the relative parenting abilities of two parents.

Fitness-for-Duty Evaluation

A fitness-for-duty evaluation examines whether an individual's psychological functioning is **compatible with the essential duties** and safety requirements of a particular position.

These evaluations may be requested when concerns arise regarding behavior, judgment, emotional stability, cognitive functioning, workplace safety, or an employee's ability to resume duties following a significant psychological event or period of impairment.

The evaluation is tied to the functional requirements of the position rather than simply determining whether the employee has a psychiatric diagnosis.

Return-to-Work Evaluation

A return-to-work evaluation addresses whether an individual **is psychologically capable of safely and effectively resuming employment** following a period of leave, treatment, hospitalization, impairment, or other significant event.

The evaluation may address readiness to return, functional limitations, relevant restrictions, risk considerations, and whether a graduated or modified return is clinically or functionally indicated.

Disability / Functional Impairment Evaluation

A disability-related psychological evaluation examines how documented psychological, developmental, cognitive, or neurobehavioral conditions affect an individual's ability to perform **relevant functional** activities.

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Depending upon the referral context, the evaluation may examine concentration, persistence, pace, memory, executive functioning, social interaction, stress tolerance, adaptive functioning, reliability, and ability to perform occupational or daily-living tasks.

The existence of a diagnosis alone **does not establish** disability. The evaluation focuses on functional impairment associated with the condition and the specific criteria relevant to the referral.

Independent Psychological/Comprehensive Evaluation

An independent psychological/comprehensive evaluation provides an objective assessment by a qualified professional who is not functioning as the individual's treating clinician.

Attorneys, courts, employers, insurers, agencies, or other parties may request these evaluations when they need an **independent opinion** on diagnosis, functioning, causation, impairment, risk, treatment history, or another defined psychological question.

Scope and terminology vary by legal or administrative context.

Psychological/Mental Health Injury / Civil Litigation Evaluation

A psychological injury evaluation examines claimed psychological or mental health symptoms or impairment **associated with an event** that is the subject of civil litigation.

Referral questions may involve the nature and severity of psychological symptoms, diagnosis, functional impairment, preexisting conditions, treatment history, prognosis, and the relationship between the alleged event and the individual's current psychological functioning.

Because causation is often disputed, these evaluations generally require careful consideration of functioning before and after the event and alternative explanations for the reported symptoms.

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Response Validity, Symptom Validity, and Malingering Assessment

Assessing response validity is often an important component of forensic psychological evaluation.

Forensic evaluators may use specialized measures and multiple sources of information to determine whether test performance and reported symptoms provide an interpretable representation of the examinee's functioning.

Evidence of inconsistent, exaggerated, minimized, or otherwise atypical responding requires careful interpretation. Malingering is **not established** merely because an individual produces an elevated score on one validity measure. Conclusions require consideration of the complete pattern of test findings, behavioral observations, records, collateral information, and the context in which symptoms are reported.

Insurance Coverage and Legal Use

Health insurance generally applies to medically necessary services performed for diagnosis and treatment. Coverage varies by policy, payer, diagnosis, referral requirements, authorization requirements, and the particular evaluation being performed.

Health insurance **generally does not cover** forensic evaluations, court-ordered evaluations, or evaluations performed primarily to answer legal, employment, administrative, or litigation questions.

The distinction is based primarily on purpose, not simply on which tests are administered. The same psychological instrument may be used in both a clinical and forensic evaluation, but the evaluator's role, informed-consent process, scope of confidentiality, record review, interpretation, and ultimate purpose differ substantially.

A clinical evaluation performed for **treatment purposes** does not automatically become a forensic evaluation because the report later becomes relevant to litigation.

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Choosing the Appropriate Evaluation

The most important question for a referral source is:

What question does the evaluation need to answer?

- For example, if the question is **whether the person has** autism, ADHD, PTSD, or another mental health condition, a clinical psychological or differential diagnosis evaluation may be appropriate.
- If the question is whether several **overlapping conditions** account for the person's presentation, a differential diagnosis/diagnostic clarification evaluation may be appropriate.
- If the question concerns **detailed cognitive functioning** following neurological illness or injury, a neuropsychological evaluation may be appropriate.
- If the question is whether a criminal defendant **presently understands** the proceedings and can assist counsel, the referral involves competency to stand trial.
- If the question concerns the defendant's mental condition **at the time** of an alleged offense, the referral involves criminal responsibility or mental state at the time of the offense.
- If the question concerns **future** violence or dangerousness, a violence risk assessment may be appropriate.
- If the question **concerns sexual behavior** or sexual recidivism risk, a psychosexual evaluation may be appropriate.
- If the court needs **recommendations** regarding **custody** or **parenting time** after evaluating the family system, a child custody/best-interests evaluation may be appropriate.
- If the question concerns one caregiver's **capacity to safely and consistently meet a child's needs**, a parental capacity evaluation may be appropriate.
- If the question concerns **an employee's ability to perform essential job duties** safely, a fitness-for-duty or return-to-work evaluation may be appropriate.

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- If the question concerns **psychological injury, functional impairment, disability, or another disputed psychological issue in litigation**, the evaluation can be structured specifically around that legal referral question.

When the appropriate evaluation is unclear, the attorney or referral source can provide the evaluator with the underlying legal question rather than attempting to select a particular test or evaluation battery. The evaluator can then determine whether the requested question falls within the evaluator's scope of practice and identify the type and scope of assessment necessary to address it.

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