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Understanding the Assessment Process for

Learning and Attention Problems

Problems with attention/concentration are some of the most common, but least specific complaints in psychology. That is, these problems can arise for very different reasons. For example, attention problems can be caused by a lack of sleep, head injuries, neurological diseases, depression, anxiety, ADHD, learning disabilities, Autism Spectrum disorders, or even just individual differences in cognitive (thinking) abilities. And all of these problems can affect our ability to function in school or work environments. Therefore, it is extremely important to identify the specific causes of the attention and learning problems because each of these conditions will have a different treatment plan.

Regardless of the questions that bring you in for an assessment, my role is to provide information and/or recommendations that will assist you and/or the individual who has referred you. As an evaluator, I must remain neutral and carefully consider all information. I cannot promise to provide a certain diagnosis or a certain outcome, but will commit to providing an assessment that is as objective as possible.

Assessment Process:

1. **Diagnostic Interview:** This is a 50 minute appointment where we can identify the presenting concerns and some important history. For young children, I prefer to gather the bulk of the history without them present so that parents can talk freely about their concerns without upsetting the kids. I will also spend some one-on-one time with kids to help establish some rapport and get to know them. For teenagers, I will gather the history from them and their parents. For adults, if you prefer to have a spouse, relative, or close friend to help provide details of current or past functioning, they are welcome to participate in the diagnostic interview. It is also helpful to bring any previous records that might be relevant.
2. **Questionnaires:** The next step involves completing personality questionnaires or behavior checklists, which help to gather structured information about a range of difficulties. Some of these are completed in the office whereas others may be sent home with you.
3. **Testing:** The appointment for the cognitive and academic testing will then be scheduled. This testing helps to identify strengths and weaknesses in the areas of intelligence, learning/memory, specific academic abilities, and attention. Generally, these appointments are scheduled for 4 hours at a time. Depending on the specific nature of the assessment, we may schedule testing over 2 sessions and the time required will vary. Testing appointments are scheduled with a technician, who is an assistant working under my supervision. The technician is trained to administer and score the psychological tests. The testing is best described as similar to school-based activities, such as solving problems, providing answers to questions, and learning new information. The important thing to remember is to try your best so we have valid and reliable information about your abilities. Parents of children are welcome to wait in the waiting room or stay close by the office during the testing, but cannot be in the room during the testing.
4. **Results:** This is a 50 minute appointment where we review the results of the assessment. I will review the test results, diagnosis, and treatment recommendations with you. This is an opportunity to ask questions and have a discussion. Often there is some additional information I will gather at this appointment.
5. **Report:** You will be provided a copy of the report, which includes information about your history, test results, diagnosis, and recommendations. The purpose of the report is to provide you with an understanding of the assessment and to communicate the results other professionals, such as physicians, psychologists, or schools.

See my Tip Sheet for Learning Disabilities for more information.