

UPDATE

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Psychological Testing Part 1: What is it?

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While all of the other areas of medicine draw on fantastic new technologies to look into the human body and determine what is wrong and how best to address it, mental health practitioners rely almost exclusively on conversation as their primary assessment tool. Whether it is called an interview, therapy session, or mental status examination, the verbal exchange between clinician and patient is the primary basis for diagnosis and treatment planning. Often this is sufficient. However, when things are less clear, the individual cannot easily describe the problem, or a greater degree of precision is required, mental health professionals can turn to psychological testing to provide critical information.

Psychological tests are tools developed to measure mental abilities, personality traits, current states, and symptoms. This information can then be used to establish a diagnosis and provide a formulation, or integrated understanding, of an individual's problems. For example, two people may be equally depressed, but the differences in their personalities and mental abilities may be critical to understanding why each is depressed and how best to help them.

While there are many psychological tests that measure a wide array of psychological attributes, all are defined by a few specific characteristics. First, and most importantly, they are standardized. The questions or tasks are always presented in the same way; the person's performance is always captured in the same way; and there are rules for

turning their performance into a score. No matter who gives the test, it is always given and scored the same way.

Second, the value of a test score is determined by comparing it to appropriate norms. For example, a 7 year old child's performance on a test of attention is compared to the average of a large sample of 7 year olds to determine if it is better, worse, or the same as that of most 7 year olds.

Third, a test must be validated before it can be used. Studies are conducted to determine if the test score predicts the things it should predict and correlates with the things it should correlate with. For example, a test of intelligence should correlate with grades in school, SAT scores, choice of career, etc. A test can only be used in clinical assessment if there is sufficient evidence that it works as it should; and even after it becomes available psychologists continue to gather data to learn more about its strengths and limitations.

Tools that are standardized, have appropriate norms, and have been adequately validated can be called psychological tests. These critical properties offset many of the subjective and idiosyncratic qualities that can affect clinical interviews and provide quantitative information about intellectual abilities, cognitive processes, personality traits, and current problems and symptoms. They make it possible to collect this information in a relative short amount of time. In this way, psychological testing allows for a better understanding of the problems that people have, and of the people that have these problems.

About Four Winds... *Four Winds Hospitals are located on two serene campuses in New York State. Four Winds Westchester is 50 minutes north of midtown Manhattan. Four Winds Saratoga is located in Saratoga Springs, 30 minutes north of Albany. Four Winds provides inpatient and outpatient mental health treatment services. We are the leading providers of specialized inpatient psychiatric treatment for children, adolescents and adults in the Northeast.*