

# Understanding Psychological Assessment

## The Diagnostic Process

There is a lot of confusion for clients and their families around the process of undertaking a psychological assessment in terms of seeking a diagnosis of neurodevelopmental disorder or for mental health concerns. As there is no standard pathway this leads to frustration for clients and their families, as well as for health professionals. This handout aims to address some of the questions and confusion around the assessment process for clients, health professionals, and school staff.

### MYTH: Psychologists Cannot Diagnose

**Any appropriately trained psychologist can diagnose a mental health or neurodevelopmental disorder.**

Psychologists are specifically trained in assessment and diagnosis of mental health and developmental disorders. **It is a myth that psychologists cannot diagnose ADHD, ASD, Mental Health Concerns etc.** There are no laws or guidelines that specify only a paediatrician or psychiatrist can make these diagnoses. In fact, best practice for diagnosis includes gathering extensive background information, clinical observation, and use of a battery of psychometric assessments completed by informants from different environments; activities that are not always able to be completed by medical professionals working as Paeds or psychiatrists.

- In determining an Intellectual Disability or the presence of a Specific Learning Disorder, a psychological assessment is required for diagnosis, i.e., these diagnoses can only be determined by a psychologist.
- In terms of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, a psychologist will complete a clinical assessment and make a diagnosis. Paediatric or psychiatric review of a psychological assessment and diagnosis is encouraged to allow a client to discuss pharmacological treatment options - this is not necessary to confirm the diagnosis.
- Only Autism Spectrum Disorder requires a multidisciplinary approach to assessment and diagnosis (i.e., best practice involves more than one health professional making the diagnosis – in these cases we complete the assessment and forward the information to the paediatrician or psychiatrist for review). **NB: Autism Spectrum Conditions cannot be diagnosed via the ADOS tool.** The ADOS is just one assessment tool, often touted as the ‘gold standard’, however, numerous other assessment tools have similar reliability and validity. The Gold Standard of assessment for ASD involves both using a battery of assessments and a multidisciplinary confirmation of a diagnosis.

### MYTH: A Paediatrician/Psychiatrist Can Diagnose – I Don’t Need Psychological Assessment

Psychiatrists and paediatricians are trained to explore and diagnose mental health and/or neurodevelopmental disorders using their clinical expertise (and sometimes with the use of psychometric screening tools). It is a valid pathway to seek a referral from a GP to a psychiatrist or paediatrician to explore/confirm a diagnosis, however, generally this process does not involve the preparation of a psychological assessment report outlining a client’s strengths and weakness and providing relevant recommendations on how to support the client across home, social, or school/work environments.

At times a psychiatrist or paediatrician will want more information and will refer a client to a psychologist for further assessment. Even if they have attempted some psychometric assessment already, often the psychologist will need to repeat these assessments and utilise multiple other assessment tools – resulting in increased costs to the client. This can also lead to frustration for informants being asked to provide further information.



## MYTH - School Staff Must Determine the Need for a Psychological Assessment

Most assessments require information from multiple sources to determine if a client meets the diagnostic criteria. School staff refusing to complete assessment tools on a basis of 'not pre-determining a need' creates further barriers to children seeking necessary supports and interventions on top of the difficulties already faced when seeking psychological assessment or diagnosis – long wait times, costs, etc.

- In terms of learning assessments, information from a classroom teacher or school staff (i.e. about a student's academic or behavioural difficulties) is necessary to help determine both the need for assessment and provide information relevant to the outcome.
- In terms of a mental health or neurodevelopmental disorder, school staff may not have previously identified any cause for concern in the school environment, however, it is still vital that school-based informants provide the necessary/requested information to the health provider (psychologist, paediatrician). Whether or not the school staff have observed specific behaviours, it is the health provider's clinical judgement that determines whether this is relevant to the assessment/diagnosis – this is especially important because many disorders involve aspects that lead to significant masking behaviours, compliance, or differing presentations in different environments.



## MYTH – I Need a Referral to See a Psychologist

You don't need a referral to see a psychologist, but you may be eligible for a Mental Health Care Plan which allows access to psychological services via Better Access (eligibility for Medicare Rebates). This will depend on what you are seeking psychological services for – you may need to discuss this with your GP.

If you are seeking a psychological assessment/diagnosis - the general process is for a client to attend for an initial/intake appointment during which we will confirm the need for assessment and outline the process and costs involved.

Please contact us/see our website for more information on fees, referrals, etc.

## Suggested Pathway To Assessment/Diagnosis

### Cognitive Assessment/Learning Assessment (Intellectual Disability, Specific Learning Disorders)

1. Identify Need for Assessment – Parents, School Staff,
2. Rule Out Factors Such As Vision Problems, Hearing Problems, Health Problems
3. Reach out to a Psychologist to Organise Appointments/Assessment
4. Complete Psychometric Assessment with a Psychologist
5. Provide the Psychological Assessment Report to Relevant Stakeholders – School Staff, GP, Allied Health Providers, Etc

### Mental Health or Neurodevelopmental Disorders

1. Identify Need for Assessment – Parents, School Staff, GP, Health Providers,
2. Obtain a Referral if Appropriate.
3. Reach Out to a Psychologist to Organise Appointments/Assessment
4. Complete Psychometric Assessment with a Psychologist
5. Obtain a Referral to a Paediatrician / Psychiatrist if Appropriate and present to the Paediatrician/Psychiatrist with the Psychological Assessment Report
6. Provide the Psychological Assessment Report to Other Relevant Stakeholders – School Staff, GP, Allied Health Providers, Etc.

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