

What is Psychological Testing?

Psychological Testing is the use of special techniques to carefully measure different aspects of human behavior ranging from intelligence or memory abilities to personality or level of depression. Psychologists use tests in clinical practice only after researchers have carefully studied and developed them. Psychologists are well trained in understanding the statistics that show whether a test is reliable and valid. *Reliable* tests are ones that give the same results under the same conditions. *Valid* tests are ones that measure what they say they measure and help us to make predictions. Most psychological tests have data collected on hundreds or thousands of different people. The psychologist can then compare the performance of a particular person on a test with other groups of people who are of the same gender, age, or diagnosis.

What kind of testing the psychologist does depends on the question one is interested in answering. Some common questions psychological testing can often answer are:

"I have been having a low mood lately and have not been sleeping well. Am I suffering from clinical depression, and if so, how depressed am I? Are these the kinds of problems that need medication?"

There are several instruments that carefully measure symptoms of depression. Depression is more than simply feeling sad about something. People suffering from depression can have disturbances in sleep, appetite, energy level, and concentration. Tests that review the number and severity of depressive symptoms include the Beck Depression Inventory or the Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression. The psychologist will then compare an overall score with other people who have taken these tests. In this way one can detect if the number and severity of symptoms are similar to someone suffering from clinical depression. A thorough evaluation can also help to learn if medication is needed, and if so, what kind.

"My grandmother doesn't seem to be keeping track of things the way she used to. Is it possible that she is senile? She also seems to be kind of depressed. What is going on?"

A situation like this would warrant a series of procedures called a **Neuropsychological Test Battery**. Neuropsychological tests measure different aspects of brain functioning, such as muscle coordination, attention and concentration, reasoning abilities, overall intelligence, and memory processes. Results are compared to an average individual of similar age. The pattern

of test scores allows the psychologist to detect significant problems in mental abilities. Sometimes even a younger person can have problems with their intellectual abilities, especially after having received a significant blow to the head. These types of tests are also helpful in assessing the aftereffects of concussion. These tests are very good at detecting problems in functioning even when no problems are detected by the MRI brain scan. For example, the early stages of Alzheimer's disease will not show problems on the MRI even though serious memory problems can be detected with psychological testing.

Other specialized tests can be administered that may detect depression. Depression often is misdiagnosed in the elderly. Because depression can seriously affect concentration abilities, the elderly who suffer from depression are occasionally mistakenly labeled "senile" when they may actually have a treatable depression. It is often difficult to make this distinction just by talking with the person.

"My husband and I have been having problems in our marriage. He seems to have a lot of problems. How much of the problem is him, how much is our marriage, and how much is both? Do we need therapy? "

In this situation the psychologist might administer various tests that measure different aspects of family functioning such as the Marital Satisfaction Inventory or the Family Environment Scale. Other tests might evaluate personality functioning or psychiatric symptoms including depression. Sometimes psychological problems can result from stress in the marriage and other times it can be the cause of the stress. Testing can be very useful in clarifying the picture. The profile can help the psychologist make an estimate of the seriousness of the marital problems and how likely it is that therapy will be helpful.

"My nine-year-old son is getting failing grades in math. What is causing this problem? Does he need special kind of help?"

There are many types of problems that can cause a child to have trouble in school. The child may have a learning disability in a particular subject that requires special teaching techniques for him to learn to the best of his ability. He may have a disorder that affects his ability to focus attention and concentrate. Sometimes medication and special teaching techniques help the child to overcome these limitations. Finally, the child may have emotional problems that lead him to be preoccupied and unable to learn very well.

A psychologist in this situation would likely recommend what is called a **Psychoeducational Test Battery**. The first part of this battery would be an IQ test such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. An IQ test provides an indication of the child's intellectual strengths and

weaknesses. The scores are then compared to an average child the same age.

Once IQ is carefully measured, an Achievement Test is administered. There are a variety of tests the psychologist might use to measure academic achievement depending on the problem presented. One test called the Woodcock-Johnson Test of Academic Achievement measures Reading, Written Language, and Mathematics and breaks these areas down into finer components. The child's scores can be compared to a data base of scores from children of the same age or at the same grade level. Achievement Test scores are then compared with measured IQ to see if any significant differences are present. For example, if measured IQ is about average but Arithmetic achievement is well below average, it is likely that the child has a learning disability in math. His academic performance is not consistent with what would be expected given his measured intelligence. It is important to diagnose these problems because kids often can be very bright, but have learning problems that lead them to feel dumb or inadequate. Knowing the child's true abilities helps one to have realistic expectations and to use teaching techniques better suited for the child.

Once intelligence and academic functioning are carefully measured, the psychologist might administer some questionnaires that assess characteristics of kids with attention problems. Some of these are completed by the parent and some by the child's teachers. Other tests that assess emotional functioning may also be used. Some of these might be administered by the psychologist with the child and others may take the form of questionnaires completed by the parents. The psychologist might observe the child in the classroom or administer a computerized test of concentration abilities.

The goal of testing is to clarify problems in a way that would be very difficult to do without the use of such tests. Other mental health professionals often use the testing skills of psychologists to answer questions such as the ones above. There are literally hundreds of psychological tests that have been well researched and that allow reliable and valid measuring of all sorts of different aspects of human functioning.

Who can administer psychological tests?

A psychologist is the only mental health professional who has the training and background to administer all psychological tests. Other mental health professionals might have access to and use some less complex tests. A psychologist's training background typically includes a four-year college degree in psychology and an additional seven years of full-time graduate study resulting in a doctoral degree. Psychologists also complete written and oral exams, a one-year residency and one year of supervised postdoctoral experience before being licensed to practice.

How do I arrange for testing?

The first step would be to call and talk with a psychologist about the situation you would like assessed. At Psychological Associates we are asked several hundred times a year to use our testing and diagnostic skills to help other mental health professionals plan treatment for their patients. We have experience in assessing individuals of all ages and most problems and have provided tests results to schools, neurologists, physicians, and the courts. If a problem is highly unique we likely can find a specialist who can assess the problem if we cannot. If testing seems appropriate we will be happy to explain what procedures will be used and will provide you with a written estimate of cost.