

CORE FUNCTION 4: ASSESSMENT

The procedures by which a counselor/program identifies and evaluates an individual's strengths, weaknesses, problems, and needs for the development of the treatment plan.

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The counselor collaborates with the client and others to gather and interpret information necessary for planning treatment and evaluating client progress.

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Although the *ASSESSMENT* process typically follows *ORIENTATION* and comes before *TREATMENT PLANNING*, the assessment process truly begins with the first contact during screening and is ongoing throughout the entire treatment experience.

Once the full formal assessment is complete, and the client's strengths, weaknesses, problems, and needs are identified and evaluated, the counselor then develops a treatment plan.

Why conduct an assessment of a client? So that an accurate diagnosis can be established which leads to the “prescription” of appropriate treatment. Providing a valid assessment is the basis for a sound treatment program and can be reasonably compared to a physician making a valid diagnosis.

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Agencies are required to document in each case how the *ASSESSMENT* is conducted. All tests, notes, and written and/or online assessments become part of the client’s paper and/or electronic record.

Each agency usually details the areas that must be assessed. A bio-psycho-social assessment is often a term used to describe this main assessment.

The counselor should assess a client in all “major” life areas:
(substance abuse history, psychological history and current functioning, educational history, vocational history, financial history, legal history, social history, spirituality, and physical health history including current medications and treatment history)

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Most of this “history” is gathered using interviewing techniques and completion of various prepared forms/ tools. The counselor must determine which assessment tool/ form is most appropriate for the client’s individual situation.

Here are some examples of forms commonly used:

- SASSI online (*Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory*)
 - MAST (*Michigan Alcohol Screening Test*)
 - ASI (*Addiction Severity Index*)
 - COWS (*Clinical Opiate Withdrawal Scale*)
- CIWA-Ar (*Clinical Institute Withdrawal Assessment of Alcohol Scale, Revised*)
 - PAWSS (*Prediction of Alcohol Withdrawal Severity Scale*)
 - Herdman Assessment Form
 - Private Agencies Created Form

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All of these forms are available on our student website page.

SASSI assessments are accessible online at sassionline.com . A certified or licensed professional may purchase electronic access or paper copies of the SASSI assessment tool from the website.

SASSI assessments are approximately \$12.50 for each electronic assessment. The counselor is assigned login credentials and will input each client's information into the computer as each individual assessment occurs. Using your computer, the counselor asks each question exactly as worded to the client, and inputs their answers. The program will automatically generate a report, making it much easier for the counselor to formulate written professional assessment results and a full evaluation report.

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ASSESSMENT includes both interview techniques for both the client and significant others, and written questionnaires and tests. The assessment should not be a “pen and paper” exercise alone. Sometimes time can be saved by having a client independently complete various questionnaires or tests ahead of time. A counselor is trained to understand and evaluate a client’s difficulty in being truthful and forthright. In the actual interview, the counselor is more likely to detect the client’s denial system and rationalization and be able to roll with client resistance.

Accurate assessment takes time. An entire assessment is not likely to be completed in one 50 minute session. Sometimes, it can take 2 or 3 sessions, and then repeated again as changes are made to the treatment plan (or prescription) as new info is obtained and evaluated.

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Some counselors begin CLIENT EDUCATION with ASSESSMENT, while other counselors begin the COUNSELING process during the ASSESSMENT process.

A counselor should display appropriate empathy along with the communication skills to facilitate the establishment of rapport. However, **education** and **counseling** are more appropriately performed after the counselor evaluates the client comprehensively and has a focus or plan for treatment.

Remember, providing **education** and doing **counseling** before a complete **assessment** is much like a medical doctor giving out educational material or prescribing medication prior to making the final diagnosis.

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Explain to the client the rationale for the use of assessment techniques in order to facilitate understanding.

In the explanation, the counselor must answer clearly:

- *What is assessment?*
- *How are we going to go about doing the assessment?*
- *How long will it take?*
- *What will happen after we do the assessment?*
- *Who will have access to the assessment results?*

Understanding and implementing this “sets the stage” for all aspects of the assessment process.

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Gather relevant history from the client including but not limited to alcohol and other drug abuse using appropriate interview techniques.

- *Be skillful in basic interview techniques and in using the clinical interview as a procedure to identify a client’s strengths, weaknesses, problems, and needs.*

The counselor interviews and gathers information from the client about alcohol and drug use and then also gathers info about other bio-psycho-social aspects of the client with specific attention to how alcohol or drug use has impacted those areas of the client’s life.

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Identify and select appropriate assessment tools.

- *be skillful in the selection and use of various assessment tools in order to assess a client.*

Examples of tools shared previously are:

- ASI
- HAF
- MAST
- SASSI
- COWS
- PAWSS
- CIWA-Ar

A competent alcohol and drug abuse counselor needs to have an understanding of assessment tools used to evaluate a client. The counselor should be trained on each tool. A counselor should also have skill in evaluating the results and formulating a report that accurately reflects the results. Following the comprehensive assessment, the counselor is responsible for using assessment results to develop a treatment plan and/or make professional recommendations.

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Develop a diagnostic evaluation of the client's substance abuse and any coexisting conditions based on the results of all assessments in order to provide an integrated approach to treatment planning based on the client's strengths, weaknesses, and identified problems and needs.

- *be able to "make sense" of the gathered assessment information.*

The counselor evaluates the info and relates the info directly or indirectly to the client's presenting problem or problems. The counselor must also be able to relate the client's alcohol or drug abuse problem to any other coexisting conditions.

A written report usually consists of a summary of pertinent findings that would show how an individual meets the criteria of DSM-5 or ICD-10 for a particular substance use disorder diagnosis. This becomes the rationale for the diagnosis that leads to the level of care recommendation.

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In Conclusion:

The diagnostic evaluation is the starting point for the development of the client's treatment plan. Within the assessment report a counselor specifies a client's strengths and weaknesses in a comprehensive manner so that any member of the treatment team or future referral source would have a clear picture of the client. Detailing the client's problems and needs is necessary in order to design intervention and treatment activities focused on the client's problem or problems.

The final written evaluation report is the single most picture of a counselor's competence. If the report is inconsistent and the conclusions do not make sense, the reputation of the counselor and the agency is negative.