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GUIDELINES

Psychological assessment undertaken remotely

SCOPE OF THESE GUIDELINES

These guidelines apply to UK practitioner psychologists conducting psychological assessments of individuals under the specific restrictions in practice which are in place during the Covid-19 pandemic. We acknowledge that remote assessment is already a recognised practice in some circumstances. However, during the pandemic many psychologists who would not routinely undertake remote assessment are considering doing so due to the restrictions in place.

Assessment is defined here as the collection of data based on eliciting or observing behaviour according to a structured or manualised approach requiring some control of environmental variables and, often, comparison of individual performance with standardised data. Assessment approaches will include, for example, administration of cognitive tests, structured questionnaires and observations of behaviour.

BACKGROUND TO THESE GUIDELINES

Assessments undertaken by psychologists include diagnostic assessments supporting legal or statutory processes, provision for educational needs, career advancement and progression of important medical treatment. The challenges of Covid-19 may affect the assessment process in many ways. Restrictions include limits on face-to-face meetings, the need to wear personal protective equipment (PPE), and limited or no opportunities for psychologists and clients to handle materials. In addition, the way Covid-19 affects everyday life will change the way clients feel and behave. This does not necessarily mean that assessment cannot be done but services and psychologists may face the choice of whether to undertake an assessment remotely, face-to-face, or not at all and will need to carefully consider the risks of each alternative.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Remote assessment has the potential to support the continuity of assessment processes during the pandemic. This approach, when carefully set up, protects both the client and the psychologist undertaking the assessment from risks associated with Covid-19 transmission. However, the use of technology alters the assessment process, so threats to validity must be carefully considered.

Psychologists routinely consider potential threats to validity of assessments and associated confidence in diagnostic or other conclusions. These will inevitably arise when

conditions significantly differ from those stated in the manual; those forming the basis for test standardisation data; or the standard way in which the assessment is undertaken. With remote assessment, psychologists may find it difficult to manipulate or influence the interpersonal environment, or to make valid judgements about aspects of client behaviour.

The precise nature of risks varies according to the type of assessment measures used and, particularly when using standardised tools, the degree to which it can be delivered in a way which is both consistent with its intended construct validity and the conditions stated in the test manual.

Assessments relying on simple verbal question and answers, or where manipulation or management of the human interface is straightforward, are amongst the most suitable for remote administration. However, even apparently simple assessments may be compromised when it is difficult to observe cues which are relied upon for effective assessment (e.g. due to poor quality of audio or video). This may also happen if assessments are delivered face-to-face while the psychologist, and potentially the client, are wearing PPE.

Assessments requiring carefully controlled presentation of visual material, physical manipulation of specialist materials, and timed motor responses are significantly more challenging while working remotely. Distributing materials may also be restricted additionally by copyright and considerations of test security. It is also likely to be more difficult to detect if the client responses are being coached or influenced in some way.

A wider range of factors related to the client are likely to influence the validity of remote assessment. These include, but are not restricted to, complex mental health presentations, neurodevelopmental conditions, age, and the presence of sensory and physical impairments.

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We recommend that consideration of the use of remote assessments is undertaken with reference to the needs and circumstances of individual clients, services or specialities. They may not be appropriate in every situation.

Psychologists should carry out careful risk assessment and document the reasoning for the decision prior to continuing with assessment in a way which is significantly different from standard practice.

Psychologists should consider the following points when thinking about remote assessment. Many of these points are routinely considered before any assessment:

The impact on the client of cancelling or postponing the assessment and/or of adapting the method of conducting it.

The accessibility of the assessment medium to the client, particularly if using digital technology.

The privacy of the location and technology used for the assessment.

Maintaining the confidentiality of any data collected.

The security of any digital technology being used for the psychologist and the client.

Psychologists may find specific advice and guidance from their BPS member network particularly helpful with regard to their own specialist context.

Psychologists can check whether test publishers have provided any guidance on the remote use of individual tests. Some may consider this a breach of copyright or the terms of use of materials, while others may have helpful suggestions to enable better remote use.

Psychologists may also need to amend existing consent arrangements to reflect the use of technology to conduct assessments.

Psychologists considering recording remote assessments should ensure they comply with relevant legislation such as GDPR as well as any organisational policies.

In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to label findings as 'preliminary' or 'provisional' and explicitly acknowledge the compromises or constraints on the assessment process.

Psychologists should be clear when reporting diagnoses, judgements or other findings about the inherent risks, and include recommendations for review and further assessment in future where appropriate. An example conditional statement is included below and may be helpful to practitioners.

EXAMPLE STATEMENT OF VALIDITY

This assessment was completed using video-link technologies. Particular care was taken during the administration to ensure the assessment did not markedly deviate from the test publishers' manuals on test administration. The use of video-link technologies presents a number of constraints on psychological assessments which would ordinarily be easily overcome during face-to-face assessments (e.g. environmental control and the management of distractions). In some circumstances, the recording and observation of non-verbal behavioural cues (e.g. avoidant eye gaze) may be compromised when using video-link technologies. Effort was taken during this assessment to overcome such difficulties. Where the method of administration may have impacted the validity of findings, any resulting uncertainty is reflected in the report and recommendations.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr Ingram Wright (Chair) Division of Neuropsychology

Helen Baron Division of Occupational Psychology

Dr Helena Bunn Division of Educational and Child Psychology

Dr Katherine Carpenter Division of Neuropsychology Chair

Janet Fraser Division of Occupational Psychology Chair Elect

Dr Nicky Hayes Committee for Test Standards Chair

Vivian Hill Division of Educational and Child Psychology Chair

Dr Katie Hunt Division of Clinical Psychology Faculty of Children, Young People and their Families Chair

Professor Gary Macpherson Expert Witness Advisory Group

Professor Christina Richards Division of Counselling Psychology Chair

Dr Allan Skelly Division of Clinical Psychology Faculty for People with Intellectual Disabilities Chair

Hannah Farndon BPS Policy Advisor (Professional Practice)

Sunarika Sahota BPS Policy Administrator

With thanks also to members of the BPS Expert Witness Advisory Group for their input.



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St Andrews House,
48 Princess Road East,
Leicester LE1 7DR, UK

☎ 0116 254 9568 🌐 www.bps.org.uk ✉ info@bps.org.uk