

## **Joint statement from the Assessment & Resource Centres of Ontario regarding online/virtual psychological assessments during the COVID-19 crisis.**

Dear Colleagues:

Over the past few weeks, our centres have been asked by students, practitioners, and Accessibility Service Offices whether it is reasonable or appropriate to be conducting online/virtual psychoeducational or neuropsychological assessments for current or prospective post-secondary students during the COVID-19 crisis. There are several clear problems linked to any assessments completed during this period of crisis, but the most significant one is that the assessment results may not be valid or reliable and would therefore require the client undergo another costly assessment after the COVID-19 crisis has ended. **Our position is therefore that, unless the individual requires immediate assessment to inform an acute situation or crisis, clinicians should not undertake psychoeducational or neuropsychological assessments in this manner.**

While there is some research supporting the implementation of telepsychology for certain types of assessments, these studies were done under *very specific circumstances*. For instance, the original studies were done with the assessor being located at their clinic and the client located in another clinic (not a home environment) in a remote/underserved area. Situated at the client's clinic was a trained technician who verified client identity, ensured the test environment was free of distractions, and who handled the stimulus books and materials used by the client. Clearly, this remote clinic model is not possible with the social distancing requirements of COVID-19.

Further, studies have not examined the validity or reliability of a clinician doing assessments with a client who is in their home (potentially with other people also in the home) and the clinician in their office. Aside from difficulties confirming the identity of the person being assessed virtually, other challenges associated with Internet testing include:

- Guaranteeing the security of test results.
- Preventing unauthorized use of testing materials.
- Preventing unseen access to answers via internet or other sources.
- Maintaining copyrights.
- Ensuring the test environment is free from distractions.
- Accommodating test-takers' special needs.

The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014) refer broadly to the topic of test security as “protection of content of a test from unauthorized

release or use, to protect the integrity of the test scores so they are valid for their intended use" (p. 225).

Conducting a psychoeducational or neuropsychological assessment requires administration of a large number of copyrighted tests. Materials that are copyright protected **may not** be shown on the screen to the client. Only a limited number of tests, mostly involving verbal responses, have been made available by test publishers for such purposes. In addition, materials may not be sent out to clients (via fax, email, or mail) for written responses or manipulation of materials involving manual dexterity. Personality questionnaires such as the MMPI and PAI were designed to be given during an office visit, and sending them home with a client undermines the validity of the obtained results as we cannot know who actually answered the questions or whether help was offered during test completion.

Another limitation is that the validity and reliability of the obtained scores are both called into question once administration procedures have been changed. Furthermore, the practical constraints are sizeable: computer, 2 cameras, audio and internet at client's end, internet glitches or failures, screen freezes, persons entering the room where client is doing the tests, and unavoidable day-to-day disruptions in the client's home such as the phone ringing, the doorbell ringing, a fire truck racing by the home, etc. And, this does not even cover the real possibility that the client could tape record the session or take screen shots (even if told not to do so), or write down information meant to be kept in working memory. All of these concerns call into question the reliability and validity of any data obtained in an unstandardized and un-researched mode of test administration.

Our careful study of the practicality and ethical issues is that:

It is not possible to conduct complete psycho-educational assessments through tele-health / on-line administration. Not all required components of the assessment may be completed through this methodology.

While it might be possible to do some testing with materials that have been approved for this methodology with some clients, such limited assessments would not meet requirements for diagnosing a learning disability or mental health disorder.

For the remainder of the current school year, students waiting for assessments have been granted interim academic accommodations, and all schools are providing tests and exams in a format that accommodates all disability needs. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that a (potentially invalid) assessment must be done urgently in order to provide needed academic accommodations right now.

For students who require updated documentation in order to continue receiving accommodations in college/university, we suggest waiting to see if the social distancing restrictions end before August. If not, it is our understanding that postsecondary institutions would provide interim accommodations during first term while the student is re-assessed. If a BSWD-funded assessment was pending prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, it is our understanding that these funds will remain available in the fall.

For Accessibility Offices and psychological service providers, our advice is to contact the OSAP office at the client's school and request that the BSWD be deferred to a future semester when the student is able to attend at the clinician's office/campus to have a complete assessment done face-to-face. It is our firm belief that the government will honor such requests as they have mandated social distancing.

RARC and NOARC remain available to offer advice, guidance and support during this crisis, so please feel free to contact us should you have any questions about these recommendations.