

Need A Psych?

Helping answer those difficult questions



Neuropsychology or Psychopathology?

Why read this?

To reduce your doubt of what psychological testing is and when to use it.

What is psych testing?

People may suggest that someone requires psychological testing. But what exactly is that? Is there just one type? Is one better than another? How do you know which one to use and why?

The purpose of psychological testing is to remove clinicians' opinion and doubt about a client's diagnosis. There are numerous tests for numerous things. However, when it comes to psychological injury, in general, they fall into two major categories. These are either:

*Neuropsychological or
Psychopathological.*

Which one is better depends on what question is trying to be answered. Both are fantastic tools. But like your favourite hammer that is great at nailing, it is rather useless at being a spirit level. You need the right tool for the job!

This fact sheet should help you understand the difference between the two types of testing and what each one does.

What is a Neuropsychological assessment?

Neuropsychology is the field of psychology that looks at how the brain works to support certain functions. To use an analogy if the brain were a computer then neuropsychology is the study of how the hardware inside the computer works. While psychopathology is the study of how the software runs on the computer.

Which of these is easier to read?

BLUE
or
RED

Most people find the blue written in blue easier to read as the cue from the colour blue and the word match while the word red does not match the cue from the colour of the print being blue not red. This requires part of your brain to separate and filter the information of colour vs word. These are the sorts of things that neuropsychology examines and measures the time it takes for the person to answer.

In neuropsychology assessments, there are right and wrong answers. Some aspects are timed and going too long means failing. It includes tests like IQ tests, Test of Pre-Morbid Functioning, and card sort activities.

In general, the premise is to get the person to do an activity until their brain cannot produce an accurate result any more. It is a bit like making the computer work as hard as it can to find out its maximum speed. This is when the person has reached their performance ceiling. This ceiling is translated into a score, such as an IQ score, or processing speed score.

What is Psychopathology testing?

Psychopathology is the field of psychology that uses techniques to determine a person's diagnosis according to the DSM or ICD. These are the diagnoses of the various mental illnesses. The Black Dog Institute's Guidelines have recommended the use of two major tests from this field - the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory 2 (MMPI-2), and the Personality Assessment inventory (PAI). In part, the reason for recommending testing over interview is the literature indicates that interview is not very accurate. The Royal Australian College of Physicians states that GPs only diagnose anxiety disorder correctly 30% of the time¹ while tests like the MMPI-2 is accurate more than 90% of the time² even on diagnoses like pseudo-seizures vs epilepsy.

Over 30 different mental illnesses plus all the personality disorders are assessed for their presence or absence using these tests. There are no objectively right or wrong answers like in the neuropsychology assessments. The tests are based on how the person feels and how these reported feelings and behaviours compare to other people. They do not require deep thinking or difficult mental processing. There are no trick questions, which means that the average person takes only a few seconds to answer each question.

Questions are things like:

- I like driving cars**
- I like going to art galleries**
- I enjoy reading poetry**
- I like fire**

In general, the premise is that people with certain psychopathologies answer questions in a certain pattern. The pattern of how the person taking the test has responded is compared to the pattern of people known to have certain psychopathologies. No question is designed to stress the brain, each one is designed to be answered simply and easily.



When to use Neuropsychology

If a person reports that they have a cognitive issue, memory decline, easily distracted, difficulty concentrating, unexplained forgetfulness, unable to understand language, or unable to recall who certain people are that are significant to them, then these are more likely neuropsychological issues.

In personal injury and compensation areas these symptoms are often the result of someone alleging that they have had a significant injury to their head. They may have lost consciousness as a result. Sometimes the symptoms appear without a significant injury and may be age related deterioration.

When to use Psychopathology

If a person reports that they have a mood disturbance, that they are sad most of the time, or worried or fearful, if they have nightmares or flashbacks, or inexplicably angry, short tempered or have strange physical sensations that their GP cannot find a cause for, then these are more likely psychopathology issues.

In personal injury and compensation areas these symptoms are often the results of someone alleging a negative event having occurred in their life that they see as being the cause of these symptoms. These may be actions seen as bullying and harassment or witnessing a traumatic event, or being subjected directly to a traumatic event.

When to use both

If a person was assaulted which caused them to lose consciousness and afterwards they have nightmares, flashbacks, and get inexplicably angry as well as forgetting things, difficulty concentrating and difficulty understanding language then they may have a mixed presentation that requires both neuropsychology and psychopathology. The two, while different, do not exclude each other, i.e., a person can have neither, one or both.

At Need A Psych we do not do Neuropsychology assessments. We specialise in Psychopathology testing. For more information please feel free to contact us.

1 RACP, 2015, Realising the health benefits of work, and evidence update
2 Derry, P.A., & McLachlan (1996) The mmpi-2 as a adjunct to the diagnosis of pseudo-seizures