

Round Table Discussion

A team of skilled clinicians work together at our agency to provide quality mental health services to our clients. As a glimpse into the methodology behind their work, four members of Neumann's clinical staff, Dr. Robert Jespersen, Jennifer Ford, Dr. Charles Behrens, and Donna Zurawski, discuss individualized care for adults with disabilities.

Dr. Robert Jespersen, M.D.
Psychiatrist

How do you help individuals with both a mental illness and a developmental disability?

In general, people respond best to mental health treatments that address the whole person. This principle is especially true for Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. We strive to coordinate the use of medication with therapies (verbal or non-verbal), structured programming, and most importantly a caring and hopeful environment in which the client can thrive.

Persons with Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities have the same (or even higher) rates of mental illness as the general population. They may have poor coping skills (i.e., trouble thinking through their problems or tolerating difficult feelings), and they may suffer from low self esteem from years of 'put downs' and not fitting into 'normal' society. In addition, they frequently have some form of brain damage (making them sensitive to psychiatric medication) and often have problems with communicating. These are some of the issues that lead to higher rates of mental illness in this population.

To deal with these issues, the treatment team attempts to obtain the best evaluation possible. Our treatment philosophy is to obtain as much information as is available from evaluations, previous treatment records, and our initial assessment. A behavioral plan is developed and non-medication therapies are attempted first. If it appears that the client needs medication, a medication chosen to address the most troubling symptoms while minimizing potential side effects is recommended. Regular meetings of the treatment team assess if the client is improving and how quickly the medication can be lowered. Our goal is to treat troubling symptoms and to give the client the best quality of life possible.

Jennifer Ford, LCPC, AT
Clinical Coordinator, Art Therapist

How does art therapy serve as a healing tool?

Art therapy can be useful as a non-verbal, expressive therapy for people with mental illness issues. These non-verbal techniques may be less threatening and useful in conjunction with talk therapy. Art therapy is also unique in that it can work well across populations and age groups.

Dr. Charles Behrens, Psy.D.
Clinical Psychologist

How do you diagnose and treat a mental illness?

To diagnose a mental illness, the mental health professional needs an accurate history of the client, a clinical interview with the client, the clinician's behavioral observations of the client, and clinical judgment. Hopefully the history will contain information from several sources in addition to the client's self-report. This is because clients are not always reliable historians and because it is helpful to obtain previous opinions, such as previous diagnostic opinions and previous methods of treatment. However, the current diagnosis always considers the present state of the client, as indicated by the client's answers to the clinical interview questions and clinician's behavioral observations of the client. After the diagnosis is given, the clinician consults with the client's treatment team to develop a treatment plan for the client, which is aligned with the client's goals and contains specific objectives which are both behavioral and measurable.

Donna Zurawski, LCSW
Director of Mental Health

What techniques does your program utilize in caring for individuals with mental illnesses?

We use an interdisciplinary team which includes clinical therapists, psychologist, psychiatrist, and a behavior specialist. The clinicians utilize an eclectic approach in both individual and group therapies. These therapies include expressive therapies, art therapy, movement therapy, women's group, mindfulness group, emotional intelligence group, etc. Currently, we are developing a Dialectical Behavior Therapy program which includes skill training, mediation and group work. This type of therapy is used in working with borderline clients.

What does your program do to keep updated on best practices?

Clinicians are encouraged to attend outside seminars and share that information with the rest of the team. Both the individual and agency are affiliated with trade organizations to keep abreast of current trends. Our agency also maintains a collaborative relationship with our Department of Human Services liaisons in order to respond effectively to any change in the rules and regulations. ■