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Deaf 101: How to Navigate Clinical Interactions with Deaf Sign Language Users

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DEAF 101:
HOW TO NAVIGATE CLINICAL INTERACTIONS
WITH DEAF SIGN LANGUAGE USERS

MELISSA L. ANDERSON
TIM RIKER
MYTH: Deaf people are disabled.

FACT: Deaf people are members of a sociolinguistic minority group.
LABELS AND DIRTY WORDS

Deaf - distinct values, traditions, and language (American Sign Language)

deaf - physical condition of hearing loss

hard-of-hearing - matter of self-identification

hearing impaired - more likely to be used as a "politically correct" term by hearing people
Deaf - distinct values, traditions, and language (American Sign Language)

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HISTORY OF OPPRESSION
PRIDE AND IDENTITY
MYTH: An ASL interpreter is a sufficient accommodation.

FACT: An ASL interpreter is necessary, but not sufficient.
COMMUNICATION

First step: What is the client’s preferred language use and fluency? Follow client’s preference.

Fracturing of deaf education system means many different communication methods may be used:

- American Sign Language
- Pidgin Signed English (mix of ASL and English)
- Manually Coded English
- Cued Speech
- Simultaneous-Communication
- Home signs
- English (via lip-reading, via written English)
- “A subgroup of deaf people, who had inadequate exposure to fluent signers, may have no formal language...simple signs, gestures, mime...”
Certified ASL interpreter with specialized training in mental health is needed. If not:

- May have limited understanding of the nuances of psychiatric assessment, mental health symptoms, and jargon ("psychobabble")
- May cause bias, error, and suggestibility to occur

If client has experienced language deprivation, a Certified Deaf Interpreter may be required.

Use the interpreter’s skills and expertise!
- Bicultural mediation/cultural brokering
- Assistance with mental status examination
MYTH: Deaf people experience unique psychiatric disorders.

FACT: Deaf people experience the same disorders as hearing people.

Psychiatric Diagnoses

Studies report that psychiatric disorders affecting Deaf populations differ significantly from those affecting hearing populations.

*The primary challenge in the accurate assessment of psychiatric disorders in Deaf populations lies in the language barrier.

**Kaufman et al., 2005, p. 52.

Rates

- There is a greater prevalence of mental health issues in the Deaf population compared to the hearing population.
- Many studies underestimate the number of Deaf individuals suffering from mental health disorders.

*Chedney et al., 2003.

Age, Gender, Ethnicity

- Deaf individuals are often misdiagnosed or left undiagnosed.
- There is a need for cultural competency in mental health services.

*Chedney et al., 2003.

Understanding these factors is crucial in improving access to mental health services for Deaf individuals.
Overall, no evidence that psychiatric disorders differ significantly between Deaf and hearing populations.

“...the primary challenge in the accurate assessment of psychiatric disorders stems from linguistic and cultural factors” (Landsberger et al., 2013, p. 92).
NOS, DEFERRED, MISSING

Deaf clients often misdiagnosed or given NOS diagnoses.

Key confounding factors in accurate assessment:
1. Clinician knowledge of Deaf culture and ASL
2. Client language deprivation and dysfluency

Differential diagnosis:
Untangling communication deficits related to language deprivation vs. deficits due to general medical brain disorders vs. symptoms of psychiatric disorders
**Rates**

Literature is generally in its infancy - many older publications are not helpful due to inappropriate methodology/bias.

Change in rates over time:
- Diagnoses becoming more specific and wider in range as result of increased clinician expertise

"There is sufficient evidence of a greater prevalence of mental health issues in the Deaf population than in the hearing population" (Fellinger et al., 2012).
MYTH: Deaf people don’t experience auditory hallucinations.

FACT: Deaf people can “hear voices.”
Considerations for Assessment of Psychosis

Look for multiple indicators of psychotic process and multiple sources of information before diagnosing a Deaf client with a psychotic disorder.

Auditory Hallucinations
- "Hearing voices" heard in Nitel, and may influence significant aspects of their lives or the interpretation of their behaviors.
- May raise concerns with the social environment or the patient's immediate situation.
- May express similar ideas or themes in their communication.
- May include symptoms of paranoia or delusions.

Thought Disorganization
- Language and/or use of language may indicate thought disorganization.
- May have a logical structure, possibly characterized by disjointed or illogical thought processes.
- May include symptoms of delusions or hallucinations.
- May express themes of persecutions or emotional distress.
AUDITORY HALLUCINATIONS

- "Hearing voices" hard to interpret in ASL and may introduce significant subjectivity based on the interpreter's understanding of the concept.

- Some evidence that those with experience of sound prior to becoming deaf more likely to report auditory features of hallucinations.

- Key = Open-ended discussion and exploration of perceptual phenomena (NOT "Do you hear voices?")
THOUGHT DISORGANIZATION

- Language deficits (due to language deprivation) easy to misconstrue as symptoms of thought disorganization

- Non-psychotic language-deprived clients generally:
  - Demonstrate emotional connectedness,
  - Display appropriate affect,
  - Lack disorganized behavior,
  - The "gist" of their communications will be non-bizarre and centered around a main theme
CONSIDERATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT OF MOOD DISORDERS

**Bipolar Disorder**
- Mania, i.e., mood could not be assessed. Client is loud and incoherent.
- Hallucinations, delusions, grandiose delusions, and paranoia.
- Client was admitted for his first episode of mania.
- Client has a history of substance abuse.

**Depression**
- Suicidal ideation, loss of interest, and cognitive symptoms, e.g., memory problems.
- Client may not realize or be able to describe depressive symptoms if they have been in a depressive state for a long time.
- Key: Not always such symptoms directly and serially, use screen to name, check for comprehension.
BIPOLAR DISORDER

"Rate of speech could not be assessed. Client is Deaf and mute." WRONG!

- Monitor and document speed, intensity, and size of signing and watch for changes over time.

- BUT, common pitfall = pathologizing normative expressive signing of ASL

- Key = background information and people who have personal knowledge of client's language use, and the interpreter's linguistic expertise!
DEPRESSION

- Overall, same cluster of physical, emotional, and cognitive symptoms as hearing people.

- Clients may not realize, or be able to describe, depressive symptoms if they have low mental health literacy.

- Key = Ask about each symptom directly and individually, use concrete examples; Check for comprehension
DEPRESSION

- Overall: cognitive

- Clients: depression, health

- Key = Element of individual, comprehend
CONSIDERATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT OF TRAUMA/PTSD

- Trauma exposure at least double compared to hearing population.
- Yet, PTSD significantly underdiagnosed.
- Trauma-related symptoms reflect greater degrees of intensity and more symptoms of dissociation.
Language considerations:
- Addiction vocabulary/idioms (e.g., cut down, hangover, eye opener)
- Need for additional explanation and comprehension checks; Don’t assume interpreter trained in addiction language

Stigma:
- Small, closeknit community with Deaf grapevine (e.g., AA/NA meetings)
MYTH: Deaf clients have different medication needs than hearing clients.

FACT: Deaf clients have the same medication needs as hearing clients.
"No studies have evaluated psychopharmacologic treatments in patients who are deaf, and no literature suggests the use of particular psychotropic agents to treat mental disorders in this population" (Landsberger et al., 2013, p.94).

What we often see in practice?
- Laundry list of diagnoses
- Matching laundry list of medications
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