

The Family Assessment

GOALS:

- Develop an initial therapeutic alliance with each family member.
- Obtain a thorough psychiatric history from the point of both the client and family members.
- Evaluate the distress level in the family.
- Determine how existing individual and family resources or skills can be enhanced in an effort to manage the disorder effectively, communicate productively and solve problems.
- How did the client and family cope with the hospitalization?
- What life events or family conflicts precipitated the episode or occurred during the recovery period?
- How did the client and family members cope with these events or conflicts?

Expressed emotion is defined as *“a measure of the degree of warmth or hostility in a relationship between two people, assessed when one person is talking about the other. High levels of criticism and hostility from family members can worsen the prognosis of mentally ill patients”*.

Miklowitz suggests that we use questions similar to those of the Camperwell Family Interview, (Camberwell Family Interview (CFI). The CFI is used to assess the emotional climate of the family by assessing individual relative's attitudes of criticism and emotional overinvolvement. The tool is used primarily in research settings, to elicit information from family members, paying close attention to the **expressed emotion** related to the answering of the following questions.

From: Brown, G. W., & Rutter M. (1966). The measurement of family activities and relationships: a methodological study. *Human Relations*, 19, 241-263.)

Family Interview Questions:

- When did client's illness first begin?
- When did the most recent episode begin? How did it come about?
- How did client end up going to the hospital?
- What were the symptoms? How did family members react to these symptoms?
- How did client spend a typical day prior to the episode? What time did client get up, eat, go to work, come home, and so forth? Who was with client at the time?
- Were there family arguments during this time? How did they start? How were they resolved?
- How would other family members describe the client as a person?
- How well do the family members typically get along?
- What about client do other family members find attractive and enjoyable?
- What aspects about client do other family members find most disturbing?

Other areas to assess include:

- What is the family's **structure or hierarchy**? Who speaks first and who follows? Who is aligned with whom and does one member tend to dominate?
- What is the **affective tone** of the interaction? Are criticisms constructive or are they personal and accusatory? Who supports whom? Do members tend to “mind read”? Do members express empathy for each other or paraphrase others' statements before making their own?
- How does the family **solve its problems**? Are problems well defined before members attempt to solve it? Are solutions cut off before they are realistically evaluated? Do members “cross-complain”? Does the discussion yield a plan of action, or is the problem left hanging?
- How **clear** is the family's communication? Do all participants seem to be talking about the same topic? Are ideas expressed completely? Do participants stay on track, or do they jump from topic to topic?