



How Mental Health Providers Keep Improving the Care They Give

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

For providers of mental health services to be effective, it's important to know that their clients are getting better. Both therapists and clinics want to make sure they're offering the highest quality care to each individual they serve.

But this is not as simple as it sounds. Measuring improvements in mental health symptoms is not an easy task.

For medical providers, it's easier to measure outcomes. When a symptom is less intense it's usually obvious. As a patient, you know when you're coughing less often. You know when the pain you're feeling becomes less severe. You know when your digestion has improved. It's fairly easy to judge your physical sensations.

Also, for medical problems, it's easier to test for improvement. Blood tests can give fairly accurate readings on many physical markers such as cholesterol or blood glucose levels. MRIs and other imaging techniques can show whether cancers are shrinking, whether bone density is improving, or whether blood circulation has improved.

It's more difficult to measure psychological and emotional changes. First, it often takes longer for improvement to occur and any change is typically gradual, so is less noticeable. It takes time to work through personal issues before you begin to experience positive improvement. Also some of the mental health medicines take four to six weeks before you begin to realize the benefit. Second, it's usually more difficult for individuals to notice emotional improvement than it is to notice physical improvement. Third, psychological and emotional improvements are hard to measure objectively, since most measures are based on self-report.

The good news for mental health providers and their clients is that the objective measures keep improving. With some of the tests available today, providers can determine with reasonable accuracy whether their clients are getting better.

Individual therapists typically use fewer objective measures, and when they do use them the measures are more likely to assess a specific target (such as measuring reductions in panic attacks, or fewer temper tantrums.) Therapists typically work with one set of techniques and know fairly well how their clients are doing. They keep track of emotional changes from session to session.

But organizations offering multiple interventions for their clients have a greater challenge. Organizations such as Upper Bay Counseling have different therapists using a variety of therapy models as well as a couple of dozen different programs that clients may be involved in.

For this type of organization, it's important to know what's working, and for which client. Most large mental health providers are concerned with the quality of their services. They want to offer services that work best for the greatest number of their clients. By measuring client outcomes,

providers learn what works best. With this knowledge, they can match an individual client to the therapy and the type of programs that will be most effective. This improves the outcome for each client served.

To measure client outcomes in mental health, there are three main areas to consider. These are: (1) change in the client's psychological symptoms, (2) change in the client's level of functioning, and (3) change in client's satisfaction.

To measure changes in psychological symptoms, clients evaluate their condition on a rating scale at different points in time. This reveals any changes in their thoughts and feelings. Are the original symptoms getting better or becoming more manageable? Has the client's mind stopped thinking any unusual or obsessive thoughts? Is the client feeling less depressed and less anxious than when he or she started treatment?

Changes in the level of functioning looks at how the client is doing in all walks of life, not so much looking at changes in the presence of symptoms. In other words, has a reduction in psychological symptoms improved other aspects of a person's life? Clients rate whether they're doing better socially and emotionally in their daily lives. Are they able to make and maintain friendships? Are they getting along better with family? Is their performance improving in school or at work?

To measure changes in client satisfaction, organizations can conduct routine 'satisfaction surveys.' Using a rating scale, clients respond to questions such as: How satisfied are you with your mental health treatment? Is the experience positive for you? Do you find the office or program area comfortable? Is your therapist effective for you?

The state of Maryland has begun monitoring mental health outcomes and has created a scale to determine improvements in outcomes. Overall, in the state, they have shown so far that 57% of adults and 60% of children were improved through treatment.

These percentages represent state averages. Some therapists and clinics do better than these averages. For example, the improvement rates at Upper Bay Counseling & Support Services are higher than the state averages (70% and better) at our locations in both Cecil and Harford counties. Outcome information might be helpful if you need mental health care.

Through improved measuring techniques, mental health providers, in our local area and across the country, keep proving that mental health treatment really works.

Rich Bayer, Ph.D., is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc. and a practicing psychologist.

###