

Mental state examination

The formal description of the child's mental state (known as mental state examination or MSE) is focused on the 'here and now': it involves information elicited, and observations made, at the time of the interview. It is useful to formulate questions in such a way as to help the young person to give an account of what is happening to them at the time of interview, for example, 'How are you feeling now?' or 'Is this happening to you here in the room with me?'

Areas to be covered in Mental State Examination

Appearance and behaviour

- Does the child look well nourished?
- Is he/she reasonably kempt/clean?
- Are you able to build a rapport with him/her?
- Is there an appropriate amount and quality of eye contact?
- What is the facial expression suggesting about their emotional state?
- Are there any unusual facial expressions or movements (for example, tics, and rarely, signs of hallucinations or intoxication)?
- Is the child restless?
- Is there any inappropriate behaviour?
- How does the child play?

Speech

Form:

- How much or how little do they talk?
- How many words do they use and do they join them into sentences?
- How many words per sentence?
- Is the grammar and syntax appropriate to their developmental level?
- Is the intonation striking or unusual?

Content:

- What are they talking about?
- Is their discourse predominantly gloomy, full of fears, or are they launching into monologues at you?

Mood

Have they been feeling sad or miserable over the last week? If mood is low or they appear depressed:

- Check whether they can cheer up, how they feel about themselves, their future and the world
- Ask about suicidal ideation or intent: 'Some young people feel so sad that they think that they would be better off dead; have you felt like this?' If yes, explore whether:
 - they wish they were dead
 - they have thought of killing themselves
 - they have thought of how they might do it
 - they have harmed themselves before
 - there are things that stop them from harming themselves or wanting to do so

(This would be linked to the information you gathered through history - taking on associated depressive features for example sleep, appetite and weight, energy level)

- Are they feeling worried or fearful?
- Are they feeling angry or irritable?

Affect

- How does their emotional state appear while in the room with you?
- Do they seem happy, sad, anxious, apathetic, irritable, suspicious, etc.?
- How does this change during the interview?
- Does their affect seem appropriate to the topic of conversation?

(Affect is to mood as weather is to climate.)

Thought content

- Worries, fears
- Hopelessness, guilt
- Low self-esteem, self-hatred
- Preoccupations and obsessions - do they have thoughts that come into their heads that they would like to get out? Any preoccupations with their body and their eating?
- Fantasies or wishes – spontaneously mentioned or enquired about (for example, ask them what they would wish for if they had three wishes)
- Quality of ideation/play
- Abnormal beliefs (more the case of older children or adolescents) for example, beliefs that someone is out to harm them, putting thoughts in their head, controlling their mind or actions, or the way they feel

Abnormal experiences

Hallucinations (more relevant with older children or adolescents) for example, an adolescent who keeps looking at a corner of the room and is whispering/talking/responding to someone although nobody else is present, and upon enquiry describes hearing a voice telling him/her to hurt/kill him/herself (command auditory hallucinations).

Cognition

- Attention span and concentration during tasks
- Orientation in time and space
- Memory

Insight

- What is their view of why they are coming to see you now?
- How much do they want to change things?
- What would they like to change?

Interviewer's subjective response to the child

Were you left feeling irritated, anxious or tired?

This is a valuable clue to the feelings that the child evokes in other people.



Above information is from the MindEd e- learning platform-
www.minded.org.uk

To find it: Search for the 'eliciting clinical information' module on home page. Then the module entitled clinical observation and examination will load. Go to slide 8