



STANDARD PRACTICE PAPER

INTERPRETING IN MENTAL HEALTH SETTINGS

RID encourages use of these papers for public distribution and advocacy.

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INTERPRETING IN MENTAL HEALTH SETTINGS

In mental health assessment, testing and treatment, effective communication is essential. When two languages and cultures are involved, communication presents the mental health professional with additional challenges. This is often the case when a patient or a significant person in the patient's life is deaf and uses sign language. The deaf individual in need of mental health services may be served most effectively by a mental health professional who is deaf and/or is fluent in sign language and has specialized training in mental health and deafness. When such specialized services are not available, the communication challenge may be met effectively through use of qualified interpreters. Interpreters who specialize in mental health interpreting are available in some areas.

What is the interpreter's role?

The interpreter's primary role is to facilitate communication.¹ This role may be performed through a variety of methods appropriate to the communication needs of the deaf person. The interpreter can provide information and opinions related to the communication process, but not on the therapeutic process. The interpreter can provide appropriate general information on issues of Deaf culture, but cannot provide information about the mental and emotional state of the deaf person.

How can I find a qualified interpreter?

You can engage a private practice interpreter directly or through an interpreter service agency. The most reliable indicator of an interpreter's level of competence is the interpreter's credentials. The most widely recognized interpreting credentials are those issued by the national Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). By passing rigorous tests, interpreters certified by RID have demonstrated not only proficiency in interpreting, but also knowledge of professional ethics and Deaf culture.² RID certified interpreters continually upgrade their skills and knowledge by participating in professional workshops and conferences. Hiring certified interpreters who specialize in mental health interpreting is advisable.

To be effective, the interpreter's communication must be compatible with that of the deaf individual. Issues for which treatment is sought, and other issues such as ethnic, cultural, gender, and linguistic concerns of the patient or family members may affect their preference in interpreters. For this reason, it is important to consult the deaf individual on the choice of interpreter, unless circumstances of the case make doing so impractical. In many instances, you will need more than one interpreter.³ A Certified Deaf Interpreter may be required.⁴ Using the same interpreter or interpreter team throughout a treatment program is encouraged for maximum effectiveness.

Why not use a family member as an interpreter?

While using a deaf person's family member may seem logical and convenient, it is not advisable for several reasons:

- The relative may have attitudinal or emotional issues that could affect objectivity and impartiality, and could prevent accurate communication. For example, a relative might feel compelled to "protect" the patient from uncomfortable questioning, or to withhold potentially embarrassing or self-incriminating information expressed by the deaf individual.
- The deaf patient may not feel comfortable to express feelings freely with a relative present.
- Using a relative could compromise the patient's right to privacy and confidentiality.
- There is no assurance that a family member has adequate language skills for communicating effectively in the mental health setting.

Why not use a person on staff who knows sign language?

Having staff who know sign language can be beneficial for any facility. However, knowing sign language, even quite well, does not make a person a qualified interpreter. Unless the staff mem-

ber is RID certified, you have little assurance that communication will be effective and accurate. Inaccurate or incomplete communication will diminish the effectiveness of the mental health services and possibly place the life and health of the patient in jeopardy.⁵

For what types of mental health services should I provide interpreting?

The mental health provider should arrange interpreter services for all situations in which effective communication is essential from initial intake through discharge, follow-up and all ancillary services. The guiding principle is to provide deaf individuals equal access to all services and programs that are available to others. This would include:

- taking the medical and psychological history
- explaining evaluations
- diagnoses
- treatment planning and treatment
- providing individual, group, couples or family therapy
- providing discharge instructions and information about follow-up care
- twelve step programs such as AA and NA
- family conferences
- psychological and neuropsychological testing

What about emergencies?

In emergencies, it is important to provide the most effective communication as quickly as possible. To reduce delays in acquiring an interpreter a facility should:

- establish and post clear procedures for contacting interpreters
- post phone numbers of qualified private practice interpreters and interpreter service agencies at switchboards and intake locations
- make sure emergency and crisis staff know the procedure for requesting an interpreter at all hours

What do I need to do in order to work effectively with an interpreter?

As you work with an interpreter, you can facilitate communication in several ways:

- Hold a pre-session to orient the interpreter to the goals of the session and special techniques you may use. Ask the interpreter about issues related to the interpreting process
- Work with the interpreter and the deaf individual to determine the best possible physical placement for all parties in the situation
- Face the deaf individual and address questions and comments to the deaf individual, not to the interpreter. Avoid saying, "Ask him..." or "Tell her..."
- Know that the interpreter can only provide information about the patient's language, not personal information or opinions about the patient
- Expect that the interpreter may occasionally pause to ask you for an explanation or clarification of terms in order to provide an accurate interpretation
- Recognize that the interpreter will interpret all that is said in the presence of all individuals and will not edit out any thing spoken or signed as an aside or anything that is said to others in the room
- Be aware that the interpreter is responsible only to interpret, and is never responsible to supervise the patient
- Hold a post-session with the interpreter to sort out communication issues and possible therapeutic concerns such as transference/counter-transference that may have surfaced

How can I know patients' rights will be respected?

An RID interpreter adheres to a Code of Ethics. Confidentiality is a fundamental tenet. Other tenets of the Code of Ethics include rendering the message faithfully, conveying the content and spirit of the speaker using language most readily understood, and not counseling, advising or interjecting personal opinions.

How can I work more effectively in group settings?

Group mental health situations may involve a deaf person with others who are not deaf. Orienting everyone involved to the function of the interpreter can enhance the effectiveness of the sessions. Some things everyone in the group should know are:

- Proper turn taking for speaking in a group is important because of the interpreting process.
- The interpreter is not a family member or friend of the deaf patient.
- The interpreter will keep all group information confidential.
- The interpreter will not participate in the group session or converse during the session.
- Participants may interact with the deaf individual through the interpreter at appropriate times.

How should I respond to interpreters' safety concerns?

The mental health professional can help interpreters by providing information on appropriate actions to take in the event of volatile situations and by respecting reasonable limitations interpreters may place on their involvement. For example, interpreters should not be left alone with patients and should not be expected to assist in physically restraining patients.

Who is responsible for arranging interpreter services?

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the mental health care provider is responsible for providing auxiliary aids and services which includes qualified interpreters. The provider cannot legally charge a patient for the interpreting services either directly or indirectly.⁵

The Association believes that effective communication is essential to quality mental health care. By using qualified RID certified interpreters, mental health care professionals can do their best to provide the same standard of care to individuals who are deaf as to those who are not deaf.

RID has a series of Standard Practice Papers available upon request. Footnotes frequently reference these materials

¹ see *Professional Sign Language Interpreting*

² see *RID Code of Ethics*

³ see *Team Interpreting*

⁴ see *Use of a Certified Deaf Interpreter*

⁵ see *Multiple Roles*

⁶ see 45 Code of Federal Regulations 84.52(d)1,3 and 28 C.F.R. 36.30(c)