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# Interpreters Unlimited

## Mental Health Interpreting



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# Interpreting Issues in Mental Health Settings: Increasing Effectiveness and Quality of Care

## *Understanding the Mental Health Setting and Context*

Mental Health professionals depend heavily on language form and content for diagnosis and treatment. Nuances in communication, including tone and the subtleties of language structure, may be significant for diagnosis and treatment efficacy. It is thus important for the interpreter to be aware that the facilitated communication between the therapist and client has as its purpose the rehabilitation of the client's mental health. Therefore, all such privileged conversations must be interpreted with a particular sensitivity and attentiveness to diagnosis, treatment, and care. In addition:

- Interpreters should be familiar with the goals and interventions of the treatment setting.
- Interpreters should seek guidance about any applicable regulations or laws which may affect him or her and influence his or her conduct.
- When in the presence of people who are experiencing instability of mood, thoughts or behaviors, interpreters must be able to remain calm, professional, attentive to their surroundings and mindful of physical safety.

## *Identifying Unique Features of Working within the Mental Health Context*

### **1. Clients with Special Concerns**

- A client may have suffered a traumatic experience that impacts his or her mood, thinking, and sense of safety.
- A client may be overwhelmed with numerous needs such as housing, education, finances, child care, etc.
- A client may have different views of time and space that are culturally determined, so it is important for an interpreter to be aware of these particulars in order to both accurately interpret meaning as well as respectfully interact with the client.



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- He or she may communicate messages about fate and personal responsibility.
- He or she may be concerned about face and face-saving.
- Non-verbal communication is part of the therapeutic experience, so it is important for the interpreter to be aware of these cues.
- The client may have experienced silencing or shaming, either culturally or interpersonally, so be patient with the communication process and its pace.
- Note that a client in a therapeutic setting may vary his or her use of tone and register. Replicate this as much as possible.
- In mental health settings, *how* a message is uttered is as important as *the content*, so be duly aware of these particularities, which may include facial expressions, volume, the rate of speech, and hand gestures.

## 2. Potential Communication Difficulties

- Communication is always impacted by cognitive, emotional, behavioral or social factors; this may be especially true in a mental health setting.
- Interpreting in mental health settings frequently presents the unique challenge of working with individuals who have dysfluent or even ailinguistic means of expression. For example, a person may stutter severely, or lack fluency in both languages being used during the session.

## 3. Interpersonal Dynamic

- An interpreter has the power to affect the dynamics of a treatment relationship, and must guard against this influence.
- An interpreter needs to be aware of potential interferences of his or her own biases, judgments and sensitivities in the therapeutic process.
- The therapist or care provider should also be aware of these dynamics.

## 4. Common Role Conflicts

- A client of the same ethnicity as the interpreter may exclude the provider.
- A client may reject the interpreter.





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- A client may have unreasonable expectations of the interpreter.
- A provider may be frustrated if interpretation takes too long.
- An interpreter may face conflict related to a role as a community advocate and employee.
- An interpreter becomes over-involved with a client.

## 5. Important Strengths for an Interpreter in the Mental Health Setting

- Comfort amidst intense emotions
- The ability to maintain a professional demeanor during highly charged interactions
- Insight into one's own psychological and emotional responses
- Utilizing resources to maintain one's own mental health
- Comfort in holding back personal opinions, comments, side conversations, and advice during session.

## *Addressing Further Concerns*

### Side Conversations

A side conversation is an unplanned dialogue that typically occurs as a result of a planned exchange between the client and interpreter. Some side conversations are useful and practical; i.e. to get further clarification, to provide further clarification because the client doesn't understand, or doesn't respond. Others are not, in that they may be tangential and interrupt the therapeutic process. If you need further clarification from the client, ask permission from the therapist before proceeding; otherwise, avoid conversation that is not directly related to the interpretation process.

### Transparent Communication

Transparent communication ensures that everyone knows what is being discussed at all times, and is especially relevant when an interpreter needs to get further clarification from either the therapist or the client. But transparency also means that no piece of communication is left out, and that the interpreter functions only as a linguistic conduit for the provider-patient relationship.



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## In the Waiting Room

In most situations, it is recommended to maintain some physical distance between the interpreter and the client in a waiting room situation. This is to preserve the professionalism and necessary distance in the interpretive relationship. It is important that the client does not attempt to use waiting room time to have a “therapy session” with interpreter. Should this occur, the interpreter could develop a deeper relationship with the client, which may lead to bias during interpretation session. Furthermore, the interpreter is not trained to respond to clients that engage in inappropriate, hostile or bizarre behavior within this treatment context. Thus it is important to avoid interpreter burn-out (caused by becoming enmeshed with clients outside the therapeutic interpretive context) and save all interaction for the provider-client appointment.

## *6 Ethical Principles of Interpretation in a Mental Health Setting*

### **Principle 1: Confidentiality**

Interpreters must treat all information learned during the interpreting as confidential.

- It should be up to the therapist to explain confidentially to client.
- Interpreters maintain confidentiality by acting to advise all parties that they will respect confidentiality.
- Decline to convey information gained in a community context, except for instances of SI/BI child abuse, elder abuse, or domestic violence.
- Decline to convey any personal information about the provider.

### **Principle 2: Impartiality**

It is expected that both the therapist and the interpreter will feel some emotions during many, if not most, therapy sessions. The goal for interpreters is to still refrain from too much emotional display (and emotional involvement) during therapy sessions, as it impacts the impartiality necessary for accurate and responsible interpretation. Please note that this is SUBSTANTIALLY different in meaning and wording from the official CHIA write-up for the ethical principle of impartiality. This is the CHIA definition:

Interpreters are aware of the need to identify any potential or actual conflicts of interest, as well as any personal judgments, values, beliefs or opinions that may lead to preferential behavior or bias affecting the quality and accuracy of the interpreting performance.



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### **Principle 3: Respect for the individuals and their communities**

Interpreters strive to support mutually respectful relationships between all three parties in the interaction (Patient, Provider, and Interpreter), while supporting the health and well-being of the patient, as is the highest priority of all healthcare professionals.

### **Principle 4: Professionalism and Integrity**

Interpreters conduct themselves in a manner consistent with the professional standards and ethical principles of the healthcare interpreting profession. Interpreters commit to truthfulness and honesty in all communications.

### **Principle 5: Accuracy and Completeness**

Interpreters transmit the content, spirit, and cultural context of the original message into the target language, making it possible for patient and provider to communicate effectively.

### **Principle 6: Cultural Responsiveness**

The interpreter seeks to understand how diversity and cultural similarities and differences have a fundamental impact on the healthcare encounter. The interpreter thus plays a critical role in identifying cultural issues and considering how and when to move to a cultural clarifier role within the session between the provider and the patient. Developing cultural sensitivity and cultural responsiveness is a necessary skill in the mental healthcare context, and begins with an introspective look at oneself.

## ***Final Guidelines and Tips***

### **Additional Ethical Guidelines -- Interpreters Will Avoid:**

- Harassment or sexual harassment of clients in any form
- Multiple relationships with clients (as much as possible)
- Conflicts of interest
- Exploitative relationships with clients (e.g. asking for money from a client's SSI claims, sexual relationships, etc.)



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- Asking provider to schedule only you for follow up sessions, especially it's primarily for monetary gain

### **Tips for interpreters**

- Stay informed with literature in mental health interpreting.
- Develop a relationship with a mentor who has more experience in this area.
- Acknowledge that the presence of an interpreter will impact all aspects of mental health care.
- Continue strategies such as pre-session and post-session to improve therapy process.
- Pay attention to any interpersonal issues or biases that may impact the therapy process.
- Talk to Supervisor and/or other colleagues.
- Reduce vulnerability to vicarious trauma by seeking a healthy balance between strong psychological boundaries, empathetic engagement and a philosophy of detachment.

### **Clinical Terms that Interpreters should know before going into session**

- Intake/Assessment
- Mental Status Exam
- "Voices," hallucinations, delusions
- Depression, Paranoia, Psychosis
- Suicidal plan/intent/means
- Homicidal plan/intent/means
- Safety Contract

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