

Evidence in Mental Health



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KEYWORDS

- Systematic review • Evidence synthesis • Mental health • Mental illness
- Evidence-based health care

KEY POINTS

- Mental health practitioners should use synthesized evidence as the basis of their clinical decision making.
- Systematic reviews are a credible source of synthesized evidence.
- Standards developed and refined by credible organizations should be used when conducting systematic reviews.

INTRODUCTION

Health practitioners wishing to positively improve health outcomes for the clients they serve have access to a unique set of collated tools to guide their practice. Systematic reviews provide guidance in the form of synthesized evidence that can form the basis of decision making as they provide care for their clients. Whether the clients being served are individuals, families, groups, or communities, systematic reviews provide a unique foundation of guidance on which clinical decisions can be made.

WHAT IS A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW?

A systematic review is a document that describes a scientific process used to collate individual research studies, or other forms of evidence, into a useful format to guide practitioners' decision making. Scholars conducting a systematic review use standards and guidelines developed by reputable organizations to systematically synthesize varied forms of evidence in a transparent and reproducible manner. Organizations providing standards and guidelines for the development of systematic reviews include the Joanna Briggs Institute (<http://joannabriggs.org/>), the Cochrane Collaboration (<http://www.cochrane.org/>), the Campbell Collaboration (<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/>),

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and the Institute of Medicine (<http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2011/Finding-What-Works-in-Health-Care-Standards-for-Systematic-Reviews/Standards.aspx>).

PROCESS OF SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

The process of producing a systematic review begins with asking a well-formed clinical question. Questions emerge frequently in the minds of practitioners as they seek to provide excellent care to clients in hopes of producing positive outcomes. Often the clinical question starts as a vague sense of wondering if there might be a better option for a given client or situation. The systematic reviewer translates that sense of clinical unease into a format that can be answered through the systematic review process.

The clinical question is often expressed in a “PICO” or “PICOT” format. The aspects of a “PICO” or “PICOT” question are as follows:

Population: What is the specific type of client(s)?

Intervention: What option for treatment do you wish to explore?

Comparator: What would the treatment be if you were not exploring the intervention?

Outcomes: How can you measure if clinical improvement has been achieved?

Time: Within what time frame would you expect to see improvement?

An example of a clinical question expressed in the PICOT format is: What is the effectiveness of group therapy, as compared with individual therapy, on 6-month medication compliance rates for individuals dealing with a new diagnosis of schizophrenia? This same question with labels identified for the PICOT elements is: What is the effectiveness of group therapy (intervention), as compared with individual therapy (comparator), on 6-month (time) medication compliance rates (outcome) for individuals dealing with a new diagnosis of schizophrenia (population)?

The PICO or PICOT formats are useful when asking questions best answered by quantitative evidence, such as randomized controlled trials or other experimental research designs. Other clinical questions, particularly those dealing with experience or meaning, are better answered by evidence from qualitative literature. When the question being asked is best addressed by qualitative evidence, a “PIC” format is suggested. The aspects of a “PIC” question include:

Population: What is the specific type of client(s)?

Phenomenon of Interest: What is the experience or condition of focus?

Context: What is the situation in which the experience or condition occurs?

An example of a clinical question expressed in the PIC format is: What is the experience of individuals with a diagnosis of schizophrenia dealing with marginalization in the workplace? This same question with labels identified for the PIC elements is: What is the experience of individuals with a diagnosis of schizophrenia (population) dealing with marginalization (phenomenon of interest) in the workplace (context)?

Following the formation of an answerable clinical question the systematic reviewer begins to proceed down a structured path that is, as one might guess, quite systematic. Sequential steps of articulating the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the type of evidence to be retrieved are outlined. The strategy used to search for the best evidence is described. The description includes a list of the databases searched, how gray (unpublished) literature was sought, key words used for the search, and any additional levels of searching. Additional levels of searching include searching for the key words of the articles obtained through the first-level search, and searching the reference lists of the articles retrieved from the prior two levels of searching. The reviewer

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