



The Challenges of Screening for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) in Adult Forensic Populations

By Jerrod Brown

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) is a group of disorders that does not lend itself well to screening, assessment, and diagnosis without proper awareness, education, and training related to the complexities of the disorder. The varied neuropsychological and dysmorphology symptomatology of FASD contribute to screening and diagnostic issues. Specifically, individuals with FASD typically have neuropsychological deficits (e.g., executive control, impulsivity, and decision-making) that require high levels of support and services, but can present relatively independently of intelligence. Complicating these already challenging neuropsychological symptoms, only around 10% of individuals with FASD have visible signs of facial dysmorphia, which become less apparent as individuals physically mature into adulthood. This combination of symptomatology limits the ability of unprepared clinicians to render differential diagnoses and increases the likelihood of under-identification and misdiagnosis of FASD.

The identification of FASD is further muddled by a lack of reliable screening instruments in forensic settings, sometimes limited access to medical and historical records, and memory-related issues. First, the relative dearth of FASD screening instruments developed and validated for use in forensic settings, especially in adult populations, only contributes to the under-identification of FASD. Second, gaps in current and historical medical records also make it sometimes difficult to identify the presence of prenatal alcohol exposure with any degree of certainty for adults. The fact that some individuals with FASD were adopted or involved in multiple foster care placements only decreases the likelihood of such

records or access to the birth mother. Third, adults with FASD often have memory issues. This includes impairments in short- and long-term memory and the potential for suggestibility (e.g., inclination to agree with statements and implications of others) and confabulation (e.g., the creation of new memories from real and fictional experiences). As such, a clinician should not solely rely on information reported by an adult who possibly has FASD without seeking out collateral sources of information. Working to resolve these screening and assessment issues and increasing the likelihood of early and accurate identification and implementation of appropriate services and supports offer the most promise in rendering desistance from involvement in the criminal justice system.

The varied symptomatology and screening and assessment issues of FASD emphasize the importance of awareness among forensic professionals. Unfortunately, there is a lack of general awareness of FASD among forensic professionals, which is contributed to by limited coverage of the disorder during education and advanced trainings. Further, there are few forensic experts in the area of FASD. Not only does this often leave many questions of how to deal with adults with FASD who are involved in the criminal justice system unanswered, but this lack of expertise also limits the potential of referral for specialized FASD assessments involving individuals in adult forensic populations. Complementing this lack of knowledge in the field is a lack of adult specialized FASD-based treatment and intervention options in both community and confined settings. These shortcomings highlight the importance of implementing FASD awareness campaigns in adult forensic settings and expanded forensic-specific coverage of FASD in educational and continuing education settings.

Biography

Jerrod Brown, M.A., M.S., M.S., M.S., is the Treatment Director for Pathways Counseling Center, Inc. Pathways provides programs and services benefitting individuals impacted by mental illness and addictions. Jerrod is also the founder and CEO of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS), and the lead developer and program director of an online graduate degree program in Forensic Mental Health from Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota. Jerrod is currently pursuing his doctoral degree in psychology.