

Measuring impairment when diagnosing adolescent ADHD: Differentiating problems due to ADHD versus other sources.

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Abstract

The DSM-5 requires clinicians to link ADHD symptoms to clinically meaningful impairments in daily life functioning. Measuring impairment during ADHD assessments may be particularly challenging in adolescence, when ADHD is often not the sole source of a youth's difficulties. Existing impairment rating scales are criticized for not specifying ADHD as the source of impairment in their instructions, leading to potential problems with rating scale specificity. The current study utilized a within subjects design (N = 107) to compare parent report of impairment on two versions of a global impairment measure: one that specified ADHD as the source of impairment (Impairment Rating Scale-ADHD) and a standard version that did not (Impairment Rating Scale). On the standard family impairment item, parents endorsed greater impairment as compared to the IRS-ADHD. This finding was particularly pronounced when parents reported high levels of parenting stress. More severe ADHD symptoms were associated with greater concordance between the two versions. Findings indicate that adolescent family related impairments reported during ADHD assessments may be due to sources other than ADHD symptoms, such as developmental maladjustment. To prevent false positive diagnoses, symptom-specific wording may optimize impairment measures when assessing family functioning in diagnostic assessments for adolescents with ADHD.