

Psychological Evaluations and Divorce: Psychologist's Language/Naming of Reports

A wide variety of concerns can surface in divorce cases. There are times when you or a client is aware that they need a mental health evaluation but are unsure exactly what they are looking for. Often an attorney or a court order asks a psychologist for a "psychological evaluation" with little other guidance given, or may then outline what should be addressed. Psychologists tend to have specific names for evaluations depending on what is being addressed, and it can be helpful to use those names when talking to a psychologist. Here are the report names for some common needs for evaluation services:

"My ex is saying I'm mentally unstable." - or - "I think my ex is mentally unstable."

An abbreviated psychological evaluation includes a diagnostic interview and emotional and personality testing, which provides in-depth information on an individual's mental health functioning in both of these areas. This evaluation is useful to understand what a person is thinking and feeling, their underlying personality structure, coping skills or areas of weakness in coping, and why a person behaves as he or she does. If previous cognitive testing exists or it seems cognitive limitations do not bear on the case, an abbreviated psychological evaluation can be an invaluable resource for providing diagnostic clarification and treatment recommendations. If cognitive concerns are raised in a case, such as diminished cognitive functioning, dementia, memory problems, mental retardation, etc., then a full psychological evaluation would be used, which includes all of the above plus cognitive testing. Notice psychological evaluations do not address parenting abilities.

"I'm concerned my ex is not capable of caring for the children." - or - "I want to show I am capable of caring for the children."

A parental capacity evaluation includes a diagnostic interview with the parent and child(ren), psychological testing of the parent, a parent-child observation, and collateral contacts and records review. The results provide in-depth information on the parent's psychological functioning and parenting abilities and functioning.

"My ex and I cannot come to any agreement on custody and visitation." - or - "I am concerned our custody schedule is detrimental to the children." - or - "My ex is turning the children against me."

A custody evaluation is a comprehensive look at all involved adults and children to determine everyone's functioning, developmental needs of the children, parenting abilities, and schedules that would be best for the children and families. A custody evaluation is also the best evaluation to help assess for **parental alienation**. Both parents, any step-parents, and the child(ren) are evaluated. This includes a diagnostic interview, emotional and personality testing, and a parenting interview with all involved adults. During the parenting interview, the parents describe their child, their parenting strengths and limitations, practical concerns, and thoughts about custody and visitation. A diagnostic interview and emotional and personality testing is completed with each child as well. A review of relevant school and/or medical/psychological records with collateral interviews of professionals, caretakers, grandparents, neighbors, etc. is conducted. Finally, an observation is completed of each parent and child together. The results provide in-depth information on each parent's psychological functioning and parenting abilities and functioning, and in-depth information on each child's needs and functioning.

"My ex is saying I abused her." - or - "My ex abused me."

A risk assessment for domestic violence includes an abbreviated psychological evaluation plus collateral contacts and records review, with an analysis of the level of risk for future behaviors. Recommendations suggest ways to reduce the risk of continued violent behavior, if applicable.

"My child is telling me her father sexually abused her."

A sexual offender assessment includes emotional and personality testing, and provides in-depth information on an individual's functioning in these areas with an added emphasis on sexual functioning and risk. The person's overall psychological and sexual functioning are taken into account. A trauma evaluation can also be conducted with the child to help determine the likelihood that the abuse occurred and make recommendations for treatment, as appropriate.

"My ex has a drinking/drug problem."

A substance abuse evaluation includes a clinical interview and standardized interview for the diagnosis of major mental disorders to determine or rule out any substance-related diagnosis, risk for future use, and treatment recommendations as needed.