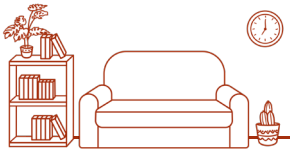
The Ohio State University
Nisonger Center



Therapist Session Checklist

Key Strategies Shared by Mental Health Clinicians
and Clients with Intellectual Disability

Prepare Before the Session

- Carefully review the client's referral and other sources of information (e.g., medical history)
- Print worksheets for intake assessments (e.g., communication preferences, support needs, etc.)
- Have visual supports ready to teach basic therapy skills (e.g., checklists, pictures, videos)

Build Rapport

- Start with friendly conversation about interests (e.g., food, games, hobbies, pets, music)
- Use art, games, or humor to create comfort
- Respect the client's autonomy and privacy

Use Clear Communication

- Use visuals, models, or drawings to explain ideas
- Speak slowly and clearly in plain language
- Check for understanding often

Offer Accommodations or Supports

- Provide extra time to think and respond
- Use large print, pictures, or hands-on activities
- Ask what helps the client learn and understand best

Set Goals Together

- Ask the client what they want to work on
- Use their own words to write goals
- Celebrate progress, big or small

Include Support People (If Wanted)

- Explain confidentiality and privacy clearly – check for understanding
- Let the client choose who to include (or not include) as a therapy partner
- Respect and prioritize the client's goals for therapy

Empowerment and Advocacy

- Support the client in speaking up
- Reinforce their strengths and independence
- Encourage self-advocacy and choice-making in every decision

Full paper: Witwer, A. N., Rosencrans, M. E., Taylor, C. A., Cobranchi, C., Krahn, G. L., Havercamp, S. M. & The Ohio State University Nisonger RRTC on Health and Function. (2025). Working with adults with intellectual disability and clinicians to advance mental health treatment: Informing practice guidelines and research. *Journal of Mental Health Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 18(1), 1-29. DOI: 10.1080/19315864.2024.2308297

For More Information:

Psychotherapy Practice Guidelines: Working with Adults with Intellectual Disability and Co-occurring Mental Health Conditions

https://nisonger.osu.edu/adult-psychotherapy-guidelines/

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

NISONGER CENTER

The contents of this paper were developed as part of a Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Health and Function awarded to The Ohio State University (OSU) Nisonger Center through a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant numbers 90RTHF0006-01-00 and 90RTHF0002-01-00). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this paper do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, or HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Recommended citation: Therapist Session Checklist: Key Strategies Shared by Mental Health Clinicians and Clients with Intellectual Disability. (2025). The Ohio State University Nisonger Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Health and Function.

https://go.osu.edu/RRTC