Working Memory: A Need for Increased Awareness and Understanding Among Forensic Mental Health and Criminal Justice Professionals

By Jerrod Brown, Ph.D.

Working Memory

Working memory can be defined as the ability to temporarily store information while this information is being actively processed. Working memory requires individuals to exhibit attentional control while managing and manipulating relevant information across the span of a few seconds. The capacity to perform this executive function is critical in everyday tasks such as linguistic comprehension, cognitive reasoning, problem solving, decision making, and learning in general. Common among individuals with learning (e.g., dyslexia) and behavioral (e.g., ADHD) disorders, deficits in working memory vary on an individual basis. When present, working memory deficits often mean the individual can temporarily store and manipulate fewer pieces of information, resulting in a limited capacity to successfully complete complicated tasks. A primary consequence of working memory deficits is the temporary or permanent loss of information. Practically, this can make it difficult for individuals suffering from working memory deficits to comprehend and remember directions, respond to questions, execute tasks, and recall the sequence of events. Struggles with these capabilities can often result in proneness to frustration and bouts of inattention. The presence of such working memory deficits can be particularly dangerous in criminal justice settings where the memories of suspects, defendants, victims, and witnesses are often the basis of life-altering legal decisions. Despite the grave consequences of such decisions, there are few
advanced education and training opportunities for professionals in forensic mental health and criminal justice settings on working memory deficits.

Training Recommendations

To address existing needs in this critical area, training for these group of professionals should familiarize attendees with working memory deficits and its impact on forensic mental health and criminal justice settings. First, attendees should acquire a basic understanding of working memory deficits including definitions and warning signs. Second, training should guide attendees on an exploration of the biological and environmental causes and risk factors of working memory deficits. Training should highlight the role that disorders such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and schizophrenia can play in the manifestation of working memory deficits. Third, training should review the diverse consequences that working memory deficits can have in the forensic mental health and criminal justice systems. This should include an active discussion of how suspects, defendants, witnesses, and individuals court-ordered to treatment with working memory deficits can have deleterious impacts on the legal and treatment process. Fourth, attendees should learn techniques to help improve the screening and assessment of individuals with working memory deficits in forensic mental health and criminal justice settings. This is imperative as these individuals often go undiagnosed or misdiagnosed as a result of inaccurate self-reported information obtained during the assessment process. Fifth, training should identify treatment techniques, strategies, and programs that have been empirically shown to improve working memory deficits. Sixth, training should draw to a close with a review of the current research literature on working memory deficits and highlight future research directions in this area. Together, these six key training objectives present an opportunity for forensic mental health and criminal justice professionals to gain a greater understanding of the impact of working memory deficits in the criminal justice and mental health systems while offering a path forward to mitigating these issues.

Biography

Jerrod Brown, Ph.D., is an assistant professor and program director for the Master of Arts degree in human services with an emphasis in forensic behavioral health for Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota. Jerrod has also been employed with Pathways Counseling Center in St. Paul, Minnesota for the past fifteen years. Pathways provides programs and services benefiting 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 editor-in-chief of Forensic Scholars Today (FST) and the Journal of Special Populations (JSP). Jerrod has completed four separate master’s degree programs and holds graduate certificates in autism spectrum disorder (ASD), other health disabilities (OHD), and traumatic-brain injuries (TBI). Email address: Jerrod01234Brown@live.com.