

# Asking **The Right** Questions

**Tips and Suggestions for Psychiatric Interview  
for Medical Students**

**Ang Ai Ling**

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Universiti Malaysia Sarawak  
Kota Samarahan

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# Dedication

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*To* my patients-past, present and future.  
Indeed, patients are the best teachers.

**Ang Ai Ling**



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# Preface

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The idea to develop a booklet on psychiatric interview came from working with medical students and identifying their needs for a concise, quick-reference guide on psychiatric interview questions.

Although psychiatric history taking has similar principles and structure as general medical history taking, it focuses on a different range of symptoms and consequently, the questions to be asked.

Basic training in psychiatry varies widely between medical schools worldwide, with the shortest duration being 2 weeks in a 6-year medical program, based on a quick survey among my colleagues and medical students I met from all over the world.

Having received referrals from doctors working in emergency department of remote hospitals who had difficulty to giving sufficient vital psychiatric history such as regarding psychotic symptoms and suicidal ideation, I had to resist the urge to walk them through the whole process of psychiatric interview but it was highly impractical in the (usually late night) phone consultations. I could only guide them through the essential questions for immediate management of the patient. It is understandably overwhelming to manage an emergency department in remote hospitals without adequate psychiatric interview skills, and it might prove stressful for the consultant on call who had to make important management decisions based on the information provided by the frontline doctors.

My hope is that this quick-reference guide on psychiatric interview questions may be of benefit to medical students, frontline doctors in remote hospitals and allied health care professionals.

**Ang Ai Ling**  
**M.D., Dr.Psych, Fellowship in Child and Adolescent Mental Health**  
**June 2019**

# Acknowledgement

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*I* thank God for His abundant grace and blessings, without which I would not be able to complete this little project. I am grateful to my family for their patience, support and understanding.

I had the privilege to learn from passionate and experienced clinicians and lecturers at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Medical Centre, Kuala Lumpur; Hospital Sentosa Kuching, Sarawak; Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health, Sarawak General Hospital; Department of Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK; Highfield Family and Adolescent Unit, Warneford Hospital, Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, UK and Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford, UK. Through this booklet, I hope to immortalize the wisdom of my teachers.

I would like to thank the former Dean of Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Professor Dr Ahmad Hata Rasit who is currently the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and International of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak) for his support and encouragement for this publication and the staff at UNIMAS Publisher for their assistance and support.

I am grateful to my patients for sharing their innermost thoughts, feelings and experience that enabled me to reflect on what works and what does not in psychiatric interview.

I appreciate my medical students' input on the aspects they find challenging in psychiatric interview. I hope that this booklet would address their needs and guide their learning.

# How to use this booklet

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- This booklet comprises of a suggestion of questions to obtain specific information in psychiatric interview and some tips wherever relevant.
- The questions are not organized in a particular order and are meant to be used flexibly, although they generally follow a logical sequence.
- Do not get too hung up on a 'list' of questions in your mind that you fail to pay close attention to what the patient is telling you. Practice makes perfect and with adequate practice, the questions will come naturally.
- The questions serve as a guide and are meant to be adapted to the situation and context. The author and publisher accept no legal responsibility or liability for any damage as a direct or indirect result of using this booklet. The users are expected to exercise common sense, empathy and compassion in every interaction, even more so with vulnerable patients.
- The readers are urged to refer to standard psychiatry textbooks for further information on the relevant subject matters.

# What this booklet is **NOT**

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- A comprehensive reference on psychiatric interview.
  - » It is designed to be a quick-reference guide. There are many excellent reference books on psychiatric interview already on the market. (Please refer 'References' and 'Further Reading' section)
- A substitute for psychiatry textbooks.
  - » It is impossible to conduct an effective psychiatric interview without an understanding of psychiatric signs and symptoms.

**'The eye sees what the mind knows'**

Additionally for psychiatric interview, **'The ear hears what the mind knows'**.

# Setting the scene

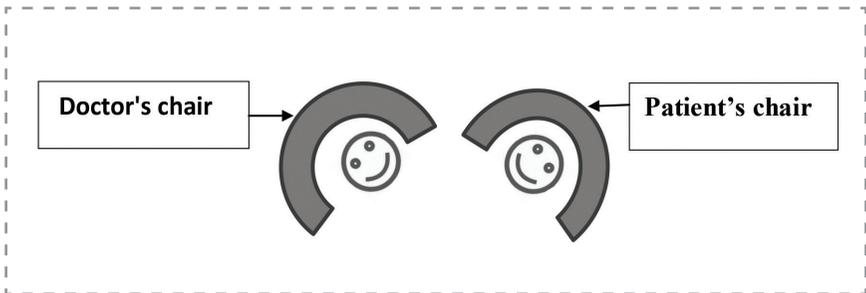
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- The main purpose of a psychiatric interview is to elicit psychiatric signs and symptoms in order to formulate a diagnosis and to devise a management plan tailored to the patient.
- A psychiatric interview should be therapeutic and therefore be conducted with empathy and sensitivity.
- Always greet the patient.
- Always introduce yourself and request that the patient introduce himself/herself.
- Inform the patient of the purpose of the interview and the estimated duration.
- Inform the patient of the confidentiality of the information they reveal (and make sure you keep your word) and the events in which confidentiality will have to be broken eg. when there is risk to the safety of the patient or others.
- Ask the patient whether he/she is more comfortable to be interviewed alone first, or in the presence of a companion (if they came with a companion).
- Make yourself comfortable and put the patient at ease.
- Be mindful and considerate that the person you are interviewing might be feeling overwhelmed or is experiencing emotional distress.

# Room and seating arrangements

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- The interview room should be a comfortable and calming space with minimal distractions.
- The traditional seating arrangement in which the patient sits directly across the doctor's desk is generally not recommended for psychiatric interview.
- The recommended seating arrangement is that the doctor and the patient sit at an angle to each other, at the same height. This arrangement is less confrontational and allows direct eye contact when necessary.



An example of recommended seating arrangement for psychiatric interview, viewed from top.

# Asking **The Right** Questions

## Tips and Suggestions for Psychiatric Interview for Medical Students

Getting accurate information about human experiences and events is crucial for professions like lawyer, police officer and doctor, where specialized interviewing techniques form an essential part of their training, although the interview techniques and focus varies in these professions.

'Asking the Right Questions; Tips and Suggestions for Psychiatric Interview for Medical Students' aims to provide a quick-reference guide for medical students and health care professionals who would benefit from learning the skills, to be used alongside standard psychiatry textbooks.



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