Differential Diagnosis

Description and Importance

Differential diagnosis is a critical component of every adult ADHD evaluation. Because symptoms such as inattention, impulsivity, and restlessness overlap with many other mental health and medical conditions, an accurate diagnosis requires more than identifying ADHD traits—it demands systematically ruling out other explanations. Failing to do so risks misdiagnosis, inappropriate treatment, and ethical violations. This chapter equips clinicians to distinguish ADHD from conditions that mimic or co-occur with it, including mood and anxiety disorders, sleep problems, substance use, learning disabilities, personality disorders, and neurological conditions. A careful differential process is not only good practice—it is the foundation of diagnostic integrity.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, clinicians will be able to:

1. Define differential diagnosis in the context of adult ADHD evaluations.

2. Identify conditions that commonly mimic ADHD symptoms.

3. Describe distinguishing features between ADHD and other psychiatric or medical disorders.

4. Explain how to integrate history, context, and objective data to rule out alternative diagnoses.

5. Apply a structured approach to ensure that ADHD symptoms are not better explained by another disorder.