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How Mental Health Professionals Define and Think about Error

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A medical error is a failure of a planned action to be completed as intended, i.e., a “technical error”, or the use of a wrong plan to achieve an aim, i.e., a “judgmental error”. The aim of this project was to gain subjective views from mental health professionals around how they view and think about error in their work. Little attention currently is being paid to mistakes in the field of mental health. Seven psychiatrists and psychologists were asked questions related to how they defined mistakes, how they learn from mistakes, and the associated diagnostic and treatment issues involved with making mistakes in their work. Using a grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis, responses were aggregated into three core categories: “Types of Legitimate Mistakes”, “Types of Learning from Mistakes”, and “Suicide as a Mistake”. The mistakes offered stemmed from the most important of misdiagnosis to methods of possible mistakes. Learning from mistakes showed the importance of being able to identify possible mistakes and the importance of trial and error in this field. Suicide, in extreme cases would be a mistake, but rather is defined as an “adverse event” and stressing importance of following protocol to maintain patient’s safety. These results may have influence in the training of future mental health practitioners and how they may better understand the possible errors that they may experience in the future.