



## Practical Polygraph: A (Very) Simple Approach To The Polygraph Suitability Interview

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One of the obvious purposes of the polygraph pretest interview is to review the topic of the investigation and to complete the formulation of the relevant questions for the data acquisition phase of the test. Another purpose for the interview, though possibly less obvious, is to provide the examinee with the information and instruction about how the test will be conducted and what will be required of the examinee during testing if they wish to achieve a favorable test result. An even less obvious goal of the pretest interview is to ascertain or verify (or document) the suitability of the examinee for polygraph testing. A number of factors have been suggested as potentially important to the determination of suitability for polygraph testing. These include: sleep, general or overall health, medical conditions, mental health conditions, medications, physical pain or discomfort, pregnancy, and the use of drugs and alcohol. Anecdotal reports suggest that some polygraph examiners in decades past may have inquired about menstruation. It is possible that a number

of these suitability topics may be excessive, unnecessary or overly intrusive.

Importantly, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) may prohibit asking questions about medical and mental health conditions under some circumstances. Another consideration is that for examinees who may trend towards the manipulative or dramatic, the traditional approach may become a form of invitation for excuse-making and context-setting – an opportunity for priming or initializing their posttest explanations. Employing a long list of suitability questions might seem to convey the notion that polygraph suitability is a fragile endeavor that is highly vulnerable to a wide variety of conditions that may actually be normal occurrences. Fortunately, polygraph suitability decisions are often not complex. Most individuals are functionally within normal limits, and the process of determining suitability or unsuitability for polygraph testing can potentially be simplified.

Fortunately, many individuals who are unsuitable for the polygraph will be screened out at the time of referral. They simply never arrive at the polygraph test, because the referring professionals are aware they may be unsuitable for testing. Another fortunate thing is that many polygraph professionals are reasonably good observers of human behavior, and possess the capacity to observe whether people are functioning reasonably within normal limits. Of course, persons who are observably impaired from drugs or alcohol are not tested. And persons who are observably unresponsive from sleepiness or fatigue are also not tested. (Keeping in mind that many adults, especially parents of young children, may often achieve sub-optimal amounts of sleep – many adults can still function reasonably within normal limits.) Also, individuals who have serious untreated or unmanaged chronic mental health or developmental disorders are also sometimes easily identified as a function of their appearance, behavior, and interactions with others – leading to questions and discussion among polygraph examiners and referring professionals.

When guidance is needed, the APA has provided a Model Policy for the Evaluation of Examinee Suitability for Polygraph Testing. Here is a link: <https://www.polygraph.org/assets/docs/Misc.Docs/Model%20Policy%20for%20Examinee%20Suitability%20Sep%209%202021.pdf> As indicated in the Model Policy, there is no published research suggesting that any medical, mental health, or developmental issues will result in erroneous examination results. Ethical, professional, and empirical practices suggest that the application of normative data and norma-

tive interpretation rules to persons whose functional characteristics are outside the normal range should be regarded with caution.

One issue of potential difficulty in polygraph suitability decisions is that some persons with less serious problems – including medical, mental health and developmental considerations – may often engage in social masking that makes their difficulties less visible unless carefully observed over longer time periods. But the ability of these individuals to engage in effective social masking may also indicate that they are somewhat likely to possess functional characteristics – social, behavioral, communication, emotive, and cognitive – that are adequate for polygraph testing.

In field practice, the task of determining an individual's suitability for polygraph testing is primarily one of determining the absence of factors that would rule-out or preclude testing the individual. What then are those factors? Quite obviously, if the individual is presently suffering from acute illness it might be wise to reschedule a polygraph test until a later time. Similarly, if an individual has experienced an injury, such as a broken bone or other injury that requires immediate medical treatment it should be addressed prior to polygraph testing. Absent these problems, most individuals will be suitable for polygraph testing – unless the examiner can observe some issue of overt functional impairment (social, behavioral communication, or physical problem) that would preclude polygraph testing. It is suggested in the Model Policy that some examinees may be considered marginally suitable for the polygraph test.



That is, these individuals may be easily characterized as unsuitable for testing, even though some issues of concern may have been identified or discussed.

With all of this in mind, here is an example of a brief and expedient polygraph suitability interview:

Examiner: *Do you have any broken bones, injuries or illnesses at this time?*

Examinee: *No.*

Examiner: *Great. Today is a good day for a polygraph test.*

Of course, this example is an oversimplification of the complex task of determining an individual's suitability for polygraph

testing. It is provided here for discussion, and to illustrate that complex issues are neither inherently prohibitive nor inherently unmanageable. This approach to the suitability part of the pretest interview makes no inquiry about medical or mental health disabilities, and attempts to avoid intrusion into topics that may be prohibited by the ADA for some polygraph examinees. Another, even more cautious approach might be to simply inquire of the examinee – after brief explanation of the testing procedure and instrumentation – if they require any accommodations to complete the test. For actual polygraph referrals with actual human subjects, it is always wise to refer to the APA Model Policy and consult with other knowledgeable professionals.

