

Why you should read this article:

- To recognise the factors that may increase the risk of suboptimal physical health in people with severe mental illness
- To enhance your understanding of the aspects that should be included in a physical health assessment of service users with severe mental illness
- To contribute towards revalidation as part of your 35 hours of CPD (UK readers)
- To contribute towards your professional development and local registration renewal requirements (non-UK readers)

Assessing the physical health of service users with severe mental illness

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Abstract

Individuals with severe mental illness are at greater risk of experiencing suboptimal physical health and have a higher premature mortality rate than the general population. This is due to a range of factors, including health behaviours and health inequalities. Therefore, it is essential that mental health nurses undertake physical health assessments as part of their care of people with severe mental illness. This article provides an overview of various aspects that should be included in a physical health assessment of service users with severe mental illness and suggests some screening and assessment tools that nurses can use to support such an assessment.

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Keywords

clinical, health promotion, mental health, mental health service users, patient assessment, patients, professional

Aims and intended learning outcomes

The aim of this article is to refresh or enhance mental health nurses' knowledge and understanding of the importance of undertaking physical health assessments with service users with severe mental illness and to provide an overview of various aspects of health that should be assessed. After reading this article and completing the time out activities you should be able to:

- » Explain why it is essential that people with severe mental illness receive a comprehensive physical health assessment.
- » Outline some of the health conditions that individuals with severe mental illness are at increased risk of developing.
- » Recognise some commonly used screening tools that can support health assessments with individuals with severe mental illness.

- » Consider how you would approach undertaking a health assessment with service users with severe mental illness in your practice area.

TIME OUT 1

How frequently do you undertake physical health assessments in your practice area? What are the policies or procedures for assessing and monitoring service users' physical health status in your workplace?

Introduction

Conducting a comprehensive, collaborative and systematic health assessment with service users is a core requirement and competence of the mental health nurse role (Health Education England 2020, NHS England 2023). Assessment is an essential part of the nursing process and influences all aspects of care, including diagnosis, treatment, outcomes, care quality and decision-making (Ellis and Standing 2023). Moreover, it is

embedded in The Code: Professional Standards of Practice and Behaviour for Nurses, Midwives and Nursing Associates (Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2018), which requires all nurses to ensure that ‘people’s physical, social and psychological needs are assessed and responded to’ and to be able to ‘accurately identify, observe and assess signs of normal or worsening physical and mental health in the person receiving care’.

A health assessment involves gaining a comprehensive understanding of an individual’s physical health, including identification of their risk factors for developing health conditions and the health behaviours that could reduce these risks. Such an assessment is particularly relevant to people with severe mental illness, who are at greater risk of experiencing suboptimal physical health and have a higher premature mortality rate compared with the general population (Chesney et al 2014). This increased risk may be due to a combination of risk factors, including health behaviours such as smoking or substance misuse, difficulties with engaging in self-care and/or accessing healthcare services, diagnostic overshadowing, reduced opportunities to engage with health promotion activities and the side effects of some antipsychotic medicines (Public Health England 2018). Undertaking health assessments and monitoring the outcomes can assist mental health nurses to identify some of the main risk factors for suboptimal physical health in this population – for example smoking, unhealthy diet and sedentary behaviour – which can lead to obesity, cardiovascular conditions or metabolic conditions, such as type 2 diabetes (Nash 2022).

To address longstanding health inequalities and adopt a preventive, integrated and early intervention approach to improving the physical health of people with severe mental illness, mental health nurses should prioritise health assessments in their practice area, whether this is an acute inpatient or community healthcare setting (Public Health England 2018). Every interaction a mental health nurse has with a service user should involve some form of health assessment (Nash 2014).

TIME OUT 2

Thinking about some of the service users you work with, what risk factors – such as health behaviours or co-occurring physical health conditions – might contribute to suboptimal physical health?

Undertaking a health assessment

Health assessments may be undertaken to investigate an acute health issue or a new or long-term condition, or to obtain baseline

information about an individual’s health status. All such assessments should include: the chronology of the development of the issue; severity of symptoms, associated triggers and relieving factors; past medical history; and family history (Nash 2014). A health assessment for an individual with severe mental illness may require a multifaceted approach, for example using a combination of self-report, discussions with the person’s family and/or supporters, the use of relevant assessment and screening tools, and a review of their medical records (Nash 2014). The health assessment should also be reviewed frequently to monitor the person’s health status and/or to determine the course of the health condition and recovery (Nash 2014).

Some physical health issues present with mental health symptoms and vice-versa – for example, an individual with hyperthyroidism may present with symptoms of anxiety.

Therefore, exploration of the person’s mental health history and a mental state examination should be incorporated into the health assessment (Hallett and Rees 2017). In addition, the nurse should consider factors such as the suitability of the environment and/or the need for any reasonable adjustments, and should adopt a trauma-informed approach (Rees 2021). The assessment may need to be undertaken in stages rather than in one appointment.

Informed consent

It is an ethical and legal requirement to gain an individual’s informed consent before undertaking any medical investigation or physical examination, and this is a fundamental aspect of effective practice (Department of Health 2009, NMC 2018). However, there may be circumstances where a health assessment is indicated for a person with severe mental illness without obtaining consent, for example in an emergency situation, if the individual has been assessed as not having capacity to consent in line with the requirements of the Mental Capacity Act 2005, or if there is no advance directive in place. In such a situation it is essential that the individual is given information about the rationale for undertaking the physical health assessment at the earliest opportunity and that their mental capacity is reassessed regularly thereafter (Office of the Public Guardian 2020). Conducting a health assessment without informed consent should be discussed as a multidisciplinary team, ideally involving the person’s family and/or supporters, and requires careful consideration of the requirements of the Mental Health Act 2007, Mental Capacity

Key points

- People with severe mental illness are at greater risk of experiencing suboptimal physical health and have a higher premature mortality rate compared with the general population
- Undertaking a health assessment is important to gain a comprehensive understanding of an individual’s physical health, including their risk factors for developing health conditions
- Aspects of a physical health assessment may include: vital signs; diet and exercise; oral, visual and auditory health; medicine side effects; drug, alcohol and tobacco use; and sexual health
- Mental health nurses should prioritise health assessments in their practice area to address health inequalities and adopt a preventive, integrated and early intervention approach to improving service users’ physical health

Act 2005 and the Human Rights Act 1998 (Department of Health 2009, Office of the Public Guardian 2020).

The remainder of this article considers different aspects of health assessments for service users with severe mental illness.

Vital signs

Decisions about what vital signs to measure will depend on the circumstances of the health assessment and the service user's health status. However, as a general guide, in the author's clinical experience it is important to measure the individual's blood pressure, oxygen saturation levels, respiratory rate, pulse rate and temperature as part of any health assessment, at baseline and at regular intervals thereafter, particularly when new medicines are commenced.

The nurse should complete these vital sign observations manually where possible, as some evidence suggests that automated observations are less likely to be accurate (Elliott 2021). In addition, the strength and volume of a pulse can only be measured by hand (Lowry and Ashelford 2015). Assessment of respiratory function should include respiratory effort, chest symmetry and additional sounds such as wheezing (Wheatley 2018). When completed manually, respiration rate and pulse rate should be measured for at least 60 seconds (Lowry and Ashelford 2015, Wheatley 2018).

Having a record of an individual's vital signs is not only useful for monitoring their health in general, but also in acute care situations such as admission to the emergency department, where these measurements can be used as a baseline for monitoring for deterioration in the person's condition.

Diet and exercise

Living with severe mental illness can adversely affect an individual's ability to meet their self-care needs, such as diet and exercise, particularly during acute episodes of mental ill health. When an individual is experiencing an acute episode of mental ill health and is unable to meet their nutrition and hydration needs, the nurse may need to undertake nutritional screening. The Malnutrition Universal Screening Tool (MUST), which is validated for use in various settings, can be used to identify individuals at nutritional risk who may benefit from an appropriate nutritional intervention (British Association of Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition 2024).

For individuals who are not at acute risk of malnutrition or dehydration, assessing diet and fluid intake can be collaborative. In

the author's clinical experience, important components of dietary assessment that can inform care planning include frequency of meals, nutritional content and portion size. The nurse should also enquire about changes to appetite, unexpected weight loss and associated symptoms (for example nausea or vomiting), and a positive response to any of these aspects may indicate the need for further investigation or referral to a dietitian.

Fluid intake assessment should consider the frequency and content of drinks consumed; for example, sugary drinks are associated with tooth decay, while caffeinated drinks may precipitate sleeping difficulties (Temple et al 2017). In addition, some individuals with severe mental illness may develop psychogenic polydipsia (water-seeking and excessive fluid intake) which can result in potentially life-threatening electrolyte imbalances (Srinivasan and Narasimhan 2022).

Consuming a balanced diet reduces the risk of obesity, which is associated with cardiovascular disease and stroke (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) 2023a). Calculating an individual's body mass index (BMI) can indicate if they are overweight or underweight. However, NICE (2023a) guidelines note that individuals from a South Asian, Chinese, other Asian, Middle Eastern, Black African or African-Caribbean background are prone to central adiposity (accumulation of fat in the lower torso around the abdominal area) and that their cardiometabolic risk occurs at a lower BMI, so using lower BMI thresholds when measuring overweight and obesity in these populations is recommended. In addition, BMI should be interpreted with caution in adults with high muscle mass as this may be a less accurate measure of central adiposity in this group (NICE 2023a). BMI should not be used to determine if an individual is eligible for referral to eating disorder services and it may increase the risk of weight-based health discrimination or diagnostic overshadowing (Dray 2021).

An individual's activity levels should be assessed, as a sedentary lifestyle can increase the likelihood of developing obesity and mental health issues such as depression (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2022a).

In some situations, it may be important to assess an individual's elimination. For example, the antipsychotic clozapine has been associated with varying degrees of impairment of intestinal peristalsis, ranging from constipation to intestinal obstruction, faecal impaction and paralytic ileus (Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency 2017).

TIME OUT 3

Research the side effects of some of the antipsychotics and other medicines commonly prescribed for service users in your care. Write down any common side effects that might adversely affect their physical health in relation to diet, fluid intake or elimination

Metabolic syndrome

Metabolic syndrome describes a cluster of health conditions – including high blood pressure, high blood glucose levels, excess body fat around the waist and abnormal cholesterol or triglyceride levels – that increase an individual's risk of developing cardiovascular disease, stroke and diabetes mellitus (Anagnostis 2024). It is important that the nurse includes assessment of these issues in the health assessment (Anagnostis 2024), as indicated by the person's health status, for example by undertaking or referring the individual for blood tests. Some service users may also require referral for an electrocardiogram (ECG) to assess cardiovascular health.

Oral, visual and auditory health

Impaired ability to self-care, inadequate nutrition, smoking and drug use are some of the risk factors for oral health issues in people with severe mental illness (Kisely et al 2015). Therefore, asking about dental pain, oral hygiene practice and whether the person accesses dental services should form part of the assessment. If appropriate, a visual inspection of the person's mouth may help to identify issues such as mouth ulcers or signs of dental decay and prompt a referral to dental services.

People with severe mental illness are at greater risk of choking than the general population, which may be due to the neurological side effects and/or anxiolytic-induced relaxation of muscles in the airway or oesophagus caused by some antipsychotics (Chen et al 2015). Excessive saliva production, coughing or choking while eating, gurgling while talking and feeling that food gets stuck may all be signs of dysphagia and indicate that further assessment is required (NHS 2023a).

Determining whether an individual requires hearing or eye tests should form part of the assessment. It is recommended that people visit an optician every two years and some service users may be eligible to receive this free of charge as part of their NHS treatment (NHS 2023b).

Medicine side effects

The health assessment of individuals with severe mental illness who take antipsychotics should include the side effects of these medicines, partly because experiencing such

side effects can increase the risk of non-adherence (Day and McKeown 2024). In addition, the side effects of some antipsychotics can be life-threatening (Caroff et al 2021). This part of the assessment can be undertaken using a validated tool such as the Liverpool University Neuroleptic Side Effect Rating Scale (LUNTERS), a self-rating scale for measuring the side effects of antipsychotics (Day et al 1995, Oxford University Innovation 2024).

It may not always be obvious to an individual that the symptoms they are experiencing are side effects of their medicines. Therefore, the nurse should be knowledgeable about common and rare side effects associated with the medicines prescribed to service users and should ask directly if they are experiencing any of these (Day and McKeown 2024).

TIME OUT 4

List the commonly prescribed antipsychotics for service users in your practice area and research the associated common and rare side effects. Based on your findings, write down some questions you could ask service users during a health assessment that might assist you to identify if they are experiencing any side effects

Skin, pain and falls

Individuals with severe mental illness are at risk of developing wounds, for example due to self-harm, drug misuse or suboptimal wound healing secondary to malnutrition and/or inadequate adherence to wound care regimens (Samuriwo and Hannigan 2019). In the author's experience, undertaking a baseline assessment of skin integrity can assist in determining the severity of current or subsequent skin-related issues and may be an opportunity to provide harm minimisation advice, such as in the case of self-harm wounds. NICE (2014a) guidelines recommend that all those at high risk of pressure ulcers, for example due to reduced mobility or suboptimal nutritional status, should be offered a pressure ulcer assessment.

As part of the health assessment, the underlying cause of any skin wounds should be identified and mapped on a body chart (Bishop 2021). In the case of self-harm wounds, the nurse should also ask the individual about the implement and method used. This is important because certain methods of self-harming, for example using an implement likely to have high levels of bacteria, are associated with higher risk of suboptimal wound healing and development of infection (NICE 2022). Any assessment of a self-harm wound must also be accompanied by a risk assessment that aims to minimise harm, prevent recurrence and assess for suicidal ideation (NICE 2022).

FURTHER RESOURCES

Office for Health Improvement and Disparities – Educational resources on public health
www.gov.uk/government/collections/all-our-health-personalised-care-and-population-health

Signs and symptoms of wound infection include oozing, redness, increased temperature and malodour (Li et al 2021). If an infection is present, the nurse should determine whether the individual is systemically unwell and consider screening for sepsis in line with NICE (2024) guidelines.

With regards to pain, it is important to remember that people's experiences are individual and that they may report pain in the absence of objectively observable signs (Craig and MacKenzie 2021). Using a pain assessment tool, such as the short-form McGill Pain Questionnaire (Melzack 1987), may support nurses to identify the location, duration, intensity, characteristics and triggers of the individual's pain (Ford 2024).

Increased risk of falls is generally associated with frailty and older age; however, based on the author's clinical experience, younger people with mobility issues, those taking antipsychotics that may have a sedative side effect, or those who have experienced brain injury or sensory impairment, are also at increased risk of falls. NICE (2013) guidelines recommend that older adults should be asked routinely if they have had a fall in the past year. Those with a history of falls or who present with issues relating to gait or balance should be referred for a multifactorial falls risk assessment (NICE 2013).

Sexual health

Evidence suggests that although people with severe mental illness appear to engage in less sexual activity than the general population, sexual practices seem to involve increased 'high-risk behaviour'. In addition, some evidence suggests that people with severe mental illness are at greater risk of contracting human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B and hepatitis C, may have elevated rates of sexually transmitted infection, higher rates of terminated pregnancies and experience more incidences of sexual violence than the general population (Hughes et al 2019). Therefore, it is essential that sexual health forms part of the health assessment.

Some medicines prescribed to people with severe mental illness, such as lithium citrate or lithium carbonate, can cause sexual dysfunction (Dossenbach et al 2005). However, the person may find it challenging to volunteer this information due to embarrassment and/or fear of stigma. Therefore, the nurse should enquire about this potential side effect, since it may have negatively affect the person's quality of life and reduce adherence to the medicine (Thana et al 2022).

It is important that sexual health assessments are not based on heteronormative and gender

binary assumptions, for example the gender of a person's partner should not be assumed (NICE 2019). NICE (2019) guidelines on sexual health also state that healthcare professionals should ensure older people have access to sexual health assessments.

Drug, alcohol and tobacco use

As part of the health assessment, the nurse needs to gain a clear understanding of the individual's drug, alcohol and tobacco use, and there are various validated tools that can be used to support this.

Alcohol use

The nurse may incorporate the use of a validated alcohol screening tool for individuals in whom excessive use of alcohol or alcohol dependence is suspected. For example, the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) (World Health Organization 2001) is designed to support professionals to determine the nature and severity of an individual's alcohol consumption. The AUDIT self-report version can be accessed at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6357a7af8fa8f557d85b7c44/Alcohol-use-disorders-identification-test-AUDIT_for-print.pdf

Alcohol dependence, indicated by a score of ≥ 20 on the AUDIT test, is characterised by craving, tolerance, preoccupation with alcohol and continued alcohol use despite harmful consequences, such as depression (NICE 2014b). Therefore, when assessing suspected alcohol dependence, the nurse should investigate whether the person is experiencing such symptoms, for example by asking if they:

- » Feel compelled to use alcohol, even if it is having a negative effect on their life or health.
- » Prioritise alcohol use over other daily activities of living.
- » Need to use greater amounts of alcohol to achieve the same effect.
- » Experience withdrawal symptoms on cessation of alcohol.
- » Use alcohol to prevent unpleasant symptoms of withdrawal.

Based on the individual's responses, the nurse may need to refer them for specialist support.

Complications associated with acute alcohol withdrawal include seizures, delirium tremens or Wernicke's encephalopathy, severe sweating and vomiting. These can be life-threatening (Funayama et al 2021) and should be treated as a medical emergency.

Drug and tobacco use

Assessing the risks associated with substance misuse is essential since intoxication and withdrawal can be life-threatening. This

should include identifying all the substances the individual is taking, the amount and frequency of use, their route of ingestion and level of dependence.

When assessing tobacco use, it is important to determine the person's degree of nicotine dependency; this can be achieved by asking how many times a day they smoke and how soon after waking they need to use tobacco (NICE 2023b). Tobacco smoke can interact with some antipsychotics and increase their metabolic rate, making them less effective and resulting in the need for increased dosages, which subsequently increases the risks of experiencing the side effects associated with such medicines. Therefore, individuals who are taking such medicines who reduce their tobacco consumption or stop smoking altogether may be prescribed lower doses (Public Health England 2020).

Public Health England (2021a) recommends the use of the ASSIST-Lite (Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Tool – Lite) tool to identify risky drug and alcohol and smoking behaviours. There are two versions of the tool, one of which is specific for use in mental health settings (Public Health England 2021b).

TIME OUT 5

Access the AUDIT alcohol screening tool at assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6357a7af8fa8f557d85b7c44/Alcohol-use-disorders-identification-test-AUDIT_for-print.pdf and the ASSIST-Lite tool for mental health services at www.gov.uk/government/publications/assist-lite-screening-tool-how-to-use How might you incorporate these tools into the health assessments undertaken in your practice area?

Access to screening and immunisation programmes

National service specifications for UK screening programmes state that these programmes are required to help reduce health inequalities and they specifically identify people with severe mental illness as needing additional support to access such programmes (NHS England 2020). However, individuals with severe mental illness living in the community are less likely to attend health screening programmes than the general population (Syson-Nibbs 2018). Therefore, during the health assessment the nurse should ask if the person has attended any screening programmes, for example cervical screening. Attending screening enables individuals to access appropriate advice and treatment at an early stage, thereby improving their long-term health outcomes (UK National Screening Committee 2021).

If the person has not attended relevant screening programmes, the nurse should attempt to identify the reasons for this. The individual may require reasonable adjustments, such as longer appointment times, or may have experienced trauma, such as sexual abuse, making it challenging for them to access certain types of screening. Therefore, the nurse should take a trauma-informed approach to the health assessment to maximise the possibility of the service user participating (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2022b).

It is also important to determine if the person has had routine immunisations. Immunisations are a form of primary prevention and reduce the risk of individuals developing a range of significant diseases (UK Health Security Agency 2024). In addition, a diagnosis of a severe mental illness may indicate eligibility for annual vaccination programmes, such as those for seasonal flu and coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (NHS England 2024). Information on vaccines and vaccination procedures can be found at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/immunisation-against-infectious-disease-the-green-book

TIME OUT 6

Reflect on a service user you provide care for who would benefit from a comprehensive physical health assessment. How might you structure this assessment? Consider what tools you might use to support your assessment and what reasonable adjustments may be required to facilitate the assessment

Conclusion

Undertaking a physical health assessment and monitoring the outcomes can assist mental health nurses to identify some of the risk factors for suboptimal health in individuals with severe mental illness. A comprehensive health assessment should incorporate all aspects of an individual's physical health, including medicine side effects, sexual health and access to screening programmes. Mental health nurses should prioritise health assessments in their practice area to address health inequalities and adopt a preventive, integrated and early intervention approach to improving the physical health of people with severe mental illness.

TIME OUT 7

Undertaking this CPD article can be used as evidence for revalidation, or the equivalent in the country where you work. Now that you have completed it, reflect on your practice in this area and consider writing a reflective account. Guidelines are available at rcni.com/reflective-account

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Physical health assessments

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE BY COMPLETING THIS MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUIZ

1. All health assessments should include:

- a) Chronology of the development of the issue
- b) Past medical history
- c) Family history
- d) All of the above

2. When conducting a physical health assessment without informed consent, which of the following does not require careful consideration?

- a) The requirements of the Mental Health Act 2007
- b) The requirements of the Mental Capacity Act 2005
- c) The requirements of the Human Rights Act 1998
- d) The requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018

3. The Malnutrition Universal Screening Tool (MUST):

- a) Should be used to identify individuals at risk of dehydration
- b) Is validated for use in various settings to identify individuals at nutritional risk
- c) Charts an individual's food and fluid intake
- d) Can only be used by dietitians

4. Psychogenic polydipsia is characterised by:

- a) Water-seeking and excessive fluid intake
- b) Avoidance of fluid intake
- c) Excessive bathing
- d) Excessive alcohol use

5. Which statement is false?

- a) Body mass index (BMI) should not be used to determine if a patient is eligible for referral to eating disorder services
- b) BMI may increase the risk of weight-based health discrimination
- c) BMI is a highly accurate measure of central adiposity in adults with high muscle mass
- d) BMI may increase the risk of diagnostic overshadowing

6. Which of these is not one of the health conditions included in metabolic syndrome?

- a) High blood pressure
- b) Abnormal triglyceride levels
- c) Abnormal cholesterol levels
- d) Hypoglycaemia

7. The side effects of which type of medicines can be measured using the Liverpool University Neuroleptic Side Effect Rating Scale (LUNSERS) tool?

- a) Antipsychotics
- b) Anxiolytics
- c) Antidepressants
- d) Beta blockers

8. Which statement is false?

- a) The antipsychotic clozapine has been associated with constipation
- b) Experiencing side effects of antipsychotics can increase the risk of non-adherence
- c) People taking antipsychotics rarely experience any side effects
- d) The side effects of some antipsychotics can be life-threatening

9. When assessing suspected alcohol dependence, the nurse should ask the individual if they:

- a) Feel compelled to use alcohol, even if it is having a negative effect on their life or health
- b) Prioritise alcohol use over other daily activities of living
- c) Experience withdrawal symptoms on cessation of alcohol
- d) All of the above

10. When tobacco smoke interacts with some antipsychotics, it can:

- a) Decrease their metabolic rate
- b) Make them more effective
- c) Increase their metabolic rate
- d) Reduce the risk of side effects

How to complete this assessment

This multiple-choice quiz will help you test your knowledge. It comprises ten multiple choice questions broadly linked to the previous article. There is one correct answer to each question.

You can read the article before answering the questions or attempt the questions first, then read the article and see if you would answer them differently.

You may want to write a reflective account. Visit rcni.com/reflective-account

Go online to complete this multiple-choice quiz and you can save it to your RCNi portfolio to help meet your revalidation requirements. Go to rcni.com/cpd/test-your-knowledge

This multiple-choice quiz was compiled by Ruth Williams

The answers to this quiz are:

1. d, 2. c, 3. b, 4. a, 5. c, 6. d, 7. a, 8. c, 9. d, 10. c

This activity has taken me ___ minutes/hours to complete. Now that I have read this article and completed this assessment, I think my knowledge is:

Excellent Good Satisfactory Unsatisfactory Poor

As a result of this I intend to: _____

