

Introduction to Psychological Disorders

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will introduce psychological disorders. You will also consider how strong problem solving and self and social awareness skills can help you better understand those who may have a disorder. by identifying:

1. Psychopathology

Psychopathology is the study of mental distress and disorders, as well as abnormal and maladaptive behavior. While this is the area that many people think of when they think of psychology, this is only a small area of study. The biggest question in this area of study is what is pathological, or abnormal, behavior that needs to be treated under clinical psychology.



TERM TO KNOW

Psychopathology

The study of mental distress and disorder and of abnormal and maladaptive behaviors.

1a. Social Nonconformity

One of the most important ways to determine what is normal or abnormal behavior is by seeing what the majority of people do or think within a certain type of situation. This basically means looking at social conformity or **social nonconformity** to find out what is abnormal. Social nonconformity is when a person does not conform or fit with the accepted social or group norms that are around them. **Self and social awareness skills** may help you identify when people you know are struggling with mental health issues. If their behavior seems to not conform with what you know about them you might start to feel concerned.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you saw somebody running down the street naked, you would probably classify this as abnormal. This would be an example of social nonconformity because most people don't behave that way.

It's important to note a few points about this way of determining behavior:

- Different kinds of norms and values can change over time with the development of new ideas and new things within a particular culture.

➞ **EXAMPLE** During the early development of human beings, it was acceptable for them to run around naked. It was only later on in history that this became a faux pas.

- Acceptable norms of behavior are dependent on the culture and context of the situation.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Within modern culture, there are times when it is considered acceptable to be naked in public, like on a nude beach.

- Norms and values can differ from culture to culture.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Certain kinds of nudity may not be acceptable in your respective culture, but within other cultures, it may be commonplace.

It is important to keep these points in mind because behavior that is different doesn't necessarily mean it is bad or maladaptive.



TERM TO KNOW

Social Nonconformity

When a person does not conform to or follow accepted social or group norms.

2. Maladaptive Behavior

The most important rule for determining whether something is psychopathological is to determine whether that behavior is **maladaptive behavior**. There are ways of thinking or acting that make it difficult for a person to adjust to the environment and new situations around them. Sometimes these people are not adaptable, and it makes day-to-day life very difficult for them.

It is important to note that as a result of this, often there can be negative effects or stigmas related to labeling people with certain kinds of mental disorders. Determining these diagnoses isn't something that is done lightly within psychology.



THINK ABOUT IT

Consider someone who is a nudist. This does not conform to most social norms, but is it maladaptive? The answer is no. This lifestyle is not going to impede a person's day-to-day life and will not be physically harmful. It's also not necessarily socially harmful, either. While it represents a small population, a nudist community of people does exist.

One scenario in which public nudity as a behavior could be maladaptive would be if someone is running through the streets naked. They could suffer physical harm if it incites someone to attack them, and they could suffer social problems as well that could impact their daily life.

It is not easy to determine what is abnormal or what constitutes a mental illness within psychology. Serious mistakes within the field of psychology have been made in the past.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In the DSM-III, the manual that outlines and defines mental illnesses for psychology, homosexuality was originally considered to be a mental illness. It wasn't until the 1970s that it was finally removed and considered not to be psychopathological.



TERM TO KNOW

Maladaptive Behavior

Ways of thinking or acting that make it difficult to adjust to the environment and new situations, and make day-to-day life difficult.

3. Insanity

Insanity is a legal term, not a psychological or medical term. It determines whether a person is fit to stand trial and to be held responsible for their actions in relation to a crime.

When people use insanity as a defense, they are saying that they are not guilty of a crime because they weren't in a mental state where they were responsible for their actions. This is not a term used within psychology.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Temporary insanity refers to when a person is so angry at the sight of something that they are not responsible for their actions at that time.



TERM TO KNOW

Insanity

A legal term which determines the mental “fitness” of a person and their level of responsibility.

4. Nature vs. Nurture

It's important to identify what causes a mental disorder so that the best treatment can be determined, but it can be difficult to determine which factors within a person have the most influence. How we use our **problem solving skill** has a lot to do with how we view the problem in the first place.

One way to highlight this issue is by considering the debate of nature vs. nurture. Which one of these has the biggest effect on psychological development?

Nature refers to any innate biological and genetic factors that a person is born with or that they develop normally over the course of their lives. These characteristics represent the internal factors that are difficult for a person to influence in any way because they are something a person is born with.

A mental disorder that relies heavily on the nature aspect is psychopathy or sociopathy. Originally, a lot of psychologists thought that this was due to a person's abusive childhood and that early mental trauma was what actually caused the development of these mental disorders. Recently, though, findings have shown that there are many innate genetic factors that contribute to the development of sociopathy. A person who has a normal childhood can still develop psychopathy.

Nurture pertains to the environmental factors that shape a person. This includes influences like the culture a person grows up in, their childhood, their parents, early developments within their life, and any significant life events that might cause mental injury or shock in the person.

Psychological trauma are negative psychological effects that cause large amounts of stress on a person, often resulting from violence, abuse, neglect or any extreme stress that the person might have endured.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A phobia is something that develops due to nurture. Major or unfounded fears of something typically form due to some traumatic experience.

Another example would be post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is a disorder that develops as a result of severe psychological trauma.

➔ **EXAMPLE** When soldiers return from a wartime setting, often the trauma of being within that setting causes them to develop this particular mental disorder.



TERM TO KNOW

Psychological Trauma

Mental injury or shock resulting from violence, abuse, neglect, or extreme stress.

5. Stress-Vulnerability Model

The psychologist Donald Hebb once answered the question about which one is more important (nature or nurture) by posing the question, “Which contributes more to the area of a rectangle, the length or its width?” By this he meant that both of them were equally important; similarly, we need to consider both nature *and* nurture in order to have a full picture of psychological disorders.

The **stress-vulnerability model** is a theory of psychopathology which states that the cause of mental disorders is a combination of both biological and environmental approaches. Based on this notion, people are born with certain kinds of genetic susceptibility to a mental disorder, but it doesn't actually develop unless that person is exposed to some environmental stresses or psychological trauma.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Schizophrenia has been shown to have a large biological component, but environmental factors are also related to its development. Factors such as prenatal nutrition, early childhood trauma, and family environment can all lead to the development of schizophrenia.



TERM TO KNOW

Stress-Vulnerability Model

A theory of the cause of mental disorders that combines biological and environmental approaches.



SUMMARY

Psychopathology is the study of mental distress and disorders, as well as abnormal and **maladaptive behavior**. Abnormal behavior can be determined by looking at social conformity or social nonconformity. You can also use strong self and social awareness skill to determine what an abnormal behavior might be given a set of circumstances. Abnormal behavior does not classify someone as psychopathological. To do this, a person must exhibit maladaptive behavior, which means that the behavior makes it difficult for the person to adapt to or function in daily life. **Insanity** is a legal term used to determine if a person is responsible for their actions; it is not a term that is generally relied on within psychology.

The role of **nature vs. nurture** in the development of a mental disorder can help us understand the factors that cause these problems. Nature refers to the genetic factors a person is born with that can lead to a particular disorder. Nurture refers to factors from a person's environment, such as nutrition or psychological trauma. The **stress-vulnerability model** is a theory of psychopathology which states that

a mental disorder is a combination of biological and environmental factors. You learned that problem solving skills can play a role in how someone reacts to stress.

Good luck!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Insanity

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