



Understanding Mental Disorders

Your Guide to *DSM-5*[®]



Foreword to *Understanding Mental Disorders*

By Patrick J. Kennedy

Mental illness touches everyone. Nearly half of all Americans have a risk of mental disorder in the course of their lifetimes. We all know someone—parent, partner, child, friend, coworker, neighbor—who has suffered or is suffering from a psychiatric condition. Mental illness costs our nation and our world trillions of dollars every year. Yet as devastating as the financial toll clearly is, the cost in lives lost or severely compromised by mental illness is incalculably greater.

Across the globe, depression robs more people of more years lost to disease than any other condition. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people ages 10–24 in the United States. Our veterans, who have given so much for their country, are among the most vulnerable: every day 22 American veterans take their own lives. Just as tragic are the stories of the many Americans living in pain who are never diagnosed or treated. Too frequently, our society's response to mental disorders is to assign blame, leaving millions of Americans marginalized, neglected, vilified, or incarcerated because of their illness.

But mental illnesses are not a question of character; they are illnesses that can be treated. And like most illnesses, mental illnesses respond best to treatments that are timely and effective. Yet often we ignore or dismiss these illnesses in their earliest, most treatable stages—and respond only when they have escalated to critical and potentially life-threatening conditions. Simply put, too few of us know the signs and symptoms of mental illnesses, and countless people suffer as a result.

This is why *Understanding Mental Disorders: Your Guide to DSM-5* makes such an important contribution. By translating the psychiatric profession's most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* into clear, accessible language, it empowers family members and friends to help identify individuals who might be at risk or who are already suffering from a mental disorder and need treatment. This book gives those of us with these conditions the keys to better understand our own situations.

Understanding Mental Disorders also helps us address the great challenge of stigma. People with mental disorders often experience fear, shame, and a terrible sense of being alone because their condition is not discussed. This invaluable guide will equip patients and families with the tools they need to break through stigma, seek professional diagnosis and care, and stick with their treatment. Mental health is the right of every citizen, and this guide will help us better understand how to claim that right.

When I was in Congress, I worked for years with my father, Senator Edward M. Kennedy, and many others on both sides of the aisle to pass the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act because so many Americans were being denied access to the treatments that could help them lead happier, more productive lives. This parity law—the first ever to ensure equal care for people with mental illnesses and substance use disorders—requires insurance providers to cover mental health treatments the same way they cover treatments for all other medical illnesses. The mental health parity act is a tremendously important milestone, but its true value will only be realized if all of us are informed and know what services to seek and expect. Researchers must continue to search for new and effective treatments, and patients and payers must make sure doctors are held accountable for providing such treatments—and then make sure insurers pay for them. We must ensure compliance with the law and demand enforcement.

When we talk about “parity” for mental illnesses, we should think not only about insurance coverage but also about how our society approaches these common disorders. If it’s unacceptable to withhold treatment until a cancer hits Stage IV or diabetes is claiming a patient’s vision or limbs, surely it must be wrong to wait until a mental illness has become life threatening before making treatment available. Early intervention is as appropriate for mental illnesses as it is for all other conditions, and we should all expect our health care providers to monitor our mental health as carefully as they do our blood pressure or cholesterol levels.

Every routine physical exam should include a “check-up from the neck up.” This guide gives us the language to use in sometimes critical discussions about mental health with all of the medical professionals we encounter.

Back in 1963, in the months before his assassination, my uncle, President John F. Kennedy, described the national lack of attention to mental health as a “situation that has been tolerated for too long” because too many Americans viewed mental illness “only as a problem, unpleasant to mention...and despairing of solution.”

My belief is that Americans today are more ready than ever to step up and address mental health issues. As this guide shows, we have solutions to the problems caused by mental illness. Do we use these solutions effectively and get them to the people who need them most? Not yet, but this guide helps to point the way.

The struggle to change this perspective is gaining ground, but we need to accelerate the campaign to enhance mental health awareness. This guide is a valuable addition to a growing list of transformative approaches—recovery and wellness self-management strategies, family education, and mental health first-aid among them—that will empower us as individuals and, ultimately, change our society’s understanding of mental illness. All of us can do our part. It is time to stop marginalizing people with mental disorders and to show greater compassion and love. You can’t eradicate bigotry just by passing a law, but you can help create a new culture that embraces the need for treating those with mental illness in the same manner as those with physical illness. Remember: If you help just one person, you help the world.

Understanding Mental Disorders gives individuals with mental disorders and their loved ones something they have too long been denied: the power that comes from knowledge and understanding.

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Learn more and purchase *Understanding Mental Disorders* at www.psychiatry.org/UnderstandingMentalDisorders.

DSM is the manual used by clinicians and researchers to diagnose and classify mental disorders. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) published the DSM-5 in 2013, culminating a 14-year revision process. For more information, go to www.DSM5.org.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) is a national medical specialty society representing more than 35,000 physician members specializing in diagnosis, treatment, prevention, and research of mental illnesses, including substance use disorders. Visit the APA at www.psychiatry.org. For more information, please contact the APA at press@psych.org.

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