



# Understanding Mental Disorders

## Your Guide to DSM-5®



### Introduction to *Understanding Mental Disorders*

About 1 in 4 adults suffers from mental illness at some point in their lives, and nearly that many children are affected as well. It is a very common—and treatable—health problem that has a major impact on quality of life for both individuals and their families. In the past, the subject of mental illness was surrounded by mystery and fear. Today, there has been major progress in the understanding of and ability to treat mental illness. Unfortunately, the early signs of mental illness often go unnoticed and those who would most benefit from treatment do not receive it. They may be reluctant to admit to having a problem, or they may not be aware of the signs and symptoms that signal the presence of a mental illness. The difference between normal and abnormal—of mental health versus mental illness—is often not clear. For this reason, it is important to have a guide to knowing when to seek care early, when treatment is most effective.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) developed *Understanding Mental Disorders: Your Guide to DSM-5* to help people whose lives have been touched by mental illness to better understand mental disorders and how to manage them. The APA is the official organization that represents approximately 35,000 psychiatrists and supports the delivery of high-quality mental health care. The APA also publishes the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. DSM-5, as the fifth edition is known throughout the world, creates a common language for diagnosing mental disorders that is used by psychiatrists and other mental health care providers. *Understanding Mental Disorders* is a practical guide to the disorders described in DSM-5. It explains mental disorders, their diagnosis, and their treatment in basic terms for those seeking mental health care and for their loved ones.

DSM-5 specifies symptoms that must be present for a given diagnosis and organizes these diagnoses together into a classification system.

The drive to organize such a system began during World War II, when it became clear that psychiatrists needed to communicate clearly with one another in describing mental disorders. First published in 1952, DSM has evolved to serve as the foundation for defining mental disorders in a variety of settings. The current edition reflects more than a decade of research and the expertise of hundreds of mental health care doctors and professionals who focus on the mental disorders that are their specialty.

Psychiatrists, psychologists, other mental health care providers, other physicians, nurses, lawyers, and social workers use DSM-5 as a clinical guide and textbook. It is used in schools, hospitals, courtrooms, and the insurance industry to define what is a mental disorder.

A mental disorder is a major disturbance in an individual's thinking, feelings, or behavior that reflects a problem in mental function. Mental disorders cause distress or disability in social, work, or family activities.

An expected response to a source of stress or loss, such as the death of a loved one, is not a mental disorder. Likewise, it is normal at times to have feelings of being down, anxious, fearful, or angry. Specific symptoms define mental disorders and help lead to a correct diagnosis. These symptoms, as well as other factors that could determine the diagnosis, are described in each chapter. They can be used to help explain thoughts and feelings to a mental health care provider. All the symptoms listed need not be present in order to diagnose a disorder. The degree of distress and effect on daily living also are important considerations.

In *Understanding Mental Disorders*, as in DSM-5, similar disorders are grouped on the basis of their symptoms and when they first appear in life. Thus, disorders that begin in childhood are found in the first chapter, while disorders that begin in adulthood appear later in the book.

For ease of use, each chapter explains the major and most common DSM-5 disorders that occur within these groups. Disorder names are in italics to aid notice within chapters, and terms are defined within the text. A glossary of terms also is included near the end of the book, and a complete listing of all DSM-5 disorders is found in Appendix A.

Although self-diagnosis based on these symptoms is tempting, a mental health care provider is best equipped to provide an accurate diagnosis and treatment. Some of the same symptoms occur in many different disorders. For example, anxiety is a symptom that occurs in people with depression, schizophrenia, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Some mental disorders can be related to a medical problem, such as heart disease or diabetes. The mental health care provider will consider possible causes and then narrow it down to the most likely diagnosis. Communicating clearly about symptoms, including when they first arose and the problems they cause, will help in getting the most appropriate diagnosis and the very best care. Lab tests and other assessments are often used to help gather information about symptoms and progress. Some measures that assess symptoms can be found at [www.psychiatry.org/practice/dsm/dsm5/online-assessment-measures](http://www.psychiatry.org/practice/dsm/dsm5/online-assessment-measures).

Mental illness affects people of all ages. Children may be too young to clearly relay in words what is wrong. Likewise, an older person with dementia may be confused and not understand what is occurring. A mental health care provider can evaluate the many behaviors, symptoms, and in some cases biological causes to determine the correct diagnosis, and thus, best treatment.

Chapter 20, “Treatment Essentials,” presents an overview of types of mental health treatments and how they work. It also reviews types of mental health care providers, what to expect from a first session, types of therapies and medications, and ways to support general mental health. Appendix B provides a list of medications often prescribed for mental disorders.

For most persons with mental illness, treatment is tailored to their symptoms and special needs. Some conditions increase the risk for other disorders (for instance, sometimes an anxiety disorder can develop into a depressive disorder). When one disorder improves, the relief in symptoms may help the treatment of the other illness. Often more than one type of treatment is used. Treatment options for specific disorders are discussed briefly in each chapter, along with information on what to expect—and when to look at other options.

Each person is unique; there is no single approach to diagnosing something as complex as a mental illness. People may express or describe mental disorders in different ways based on their culture or background. Each chapter includes personal stories that show how mental illness may have affected individuals, and their families and friends. (Names, ages, and other information have been changed to disguise each real-life person in these stories.)

This level of awareness is as important for caregivers as it is for a person with a mental disorder. In some cases, those caring for an individual with a mental illness—whether it is a spouse, sibling, or parent—can have more insight about the effects of the illness than the person with the disorder. Some mental illnesses can have an intense effect on the mind, clouding judgment and leading to harmful behaviors such as use of alcohol or other drugs. The person may be unable to think clearly enough to help himself or herself, and others must intervene.

Common warning signs of mental illness include a change in sleep (more or less than usually needed), changes in weight (gain or loss), changes in mood or attention, and feeling “not normal.” Being alert to warning signs and knowing when to seek help and what to expect from treatment can be vital. The chapters in *Understanding Mental Disorders* highlight risk factors for certain disorders.

Living with a mental illness, whether it affects you or a loved one, can be very hard—but help is available. People can learn how to maintain a healthy mind and body, and to make positive changes that can improve quality of life and outlook. One way of dealing with mental illness is by seeking support from people who care. In addition to a helpful doctor or mental health care provider, support groups and other organizations can provide sound knowledge for coping with the disorder. Appendix C includes a listing of these additional resources.

A healthy lifestyle can promote optimal mental health. This involves getting sufficient exercise and adequate sleep, having a healthy diet, and learning to confide in friends and trusted family members. It also means learning how to better cope with life’s stresses. Even small steps toward these goals help improve health and well-being. Tips for maintaining good mental health are found throughout *Understanding Mental Disorders*.

*Understanding Mental Disorders* is designed to help combat mental illness through education about the disorders and their symptoms, when to seek help, and what to expect from treatment. It can help caregivers serve as the “eyes and ears” of those who may not recognize symptoms in themselves. These disorders can be very painful, but as with any other health condition, most can be treated successfully. Treatment can relieve symptoms and reduce suffering. Overcoming mental illness will take some work and effort, but there is always hope—and help.

Learn more and purchase *Understanding Mental Disorders* at [www.psychiatry.org/UnderstandingMentalDisorders](http://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](http://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](http://www.psychiatry.org). For more information, please contact the APA at [press@psych.org](mailto:press@psych.org).

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