

Study Guide 16-1

What Are Psychological Disorders?

For use with textbook pages 447-454

Key Term

DSM-IV the fourth version of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (page 451)

Drawing From Experience

Have you ever been around someone who acted “odd?” Do you think this person is mentally ill or just different? How would you define abnormal behavior?

In this section, you will learn about the difficulty in judging normal from abnormal behavior. You will also learn about a system for classifying psychological problems.

Organizing Your Thoughts

Use the diagram below to help you take notes as you read the summaries that follow. Think about the different ways to define abnormal behavior. Give an example of behavior that would be considered “abnormal” according to each approach listed below.

Approach	Example
Deviation	1.
Adjustment	2.
Psychological Health	3.

Read to Learn

Introduction (page 447)

It is often difficult to draw a line between normal and abnormal behavior. Many people feel that having visions and hearing voices is an important part of a religious experience. Others believe these are signs of a psychological disorder (mental illness). The fact that someone is different does not always mean that the person is mentally ill.

4. Describe a time when you chose to be different in a healthy way.

Defining and Identifying Psychological Disorders (page 448)

There are several ways to define abnormality. There is no one correct definition, however. One approach is to say that whatever most people do is normal. Then abnormality would be anything that deviates or differs from what most people do. This is the deviation approach. For example, most people wear clothes out in the cold. According to the deviation approach, someone who wore a bathing suit in the snow would be abnormal. The deviation approach has serious problems. What most people do is not always right or best.

Another way to tell the difference between normal and abnormal is to say that normal people can get along in the world. They can take care of themselves, work, find friends, and live by the rules of society. By this definition, abnormal people are those who cannot adjust. According to this adjustment approach, people who are so unhappy that they refuse to eat or cannot hold a job would be abnormal. One problem with this approach is that some people with psychological disorders seem perfectly normal.

Some psychologists define normal and abnormal in terms of psychological health, similar to physical health or illness. They feel that a normal or healthy person is one who is making progress toward being the best they can be. As you learned earlier, this is the idea of self-actualization. One problem with this approach is that it is hard to tell if people are making progress toward their full potential.

Some psychologists believe that labeling someone as mentally ill simply because he or she is odd is wrong. Thomas Szasz argues that most people we call mentally ill are not ill at all. They just have "problems in living" that cause conflicts with the world around them. Rather than helping them deal with their problems, we often label them sick and shut them up in hospitals. This is an uncommon view. Most psychologists believe that some people do need hospitalization.

As you can see, abnormality is difficult to define. This means we should be careful not to judge someone as sick just because he or she acts in a way we cannot understand. Mild psychological problems are common. Only when the problems are big enough to get in the way of everyday life do they become illnesses.

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5. Give an example of a behavior that would be considered abnormal according to the adjustment approach.

The Problem of Classification (page 450)

For years psychiatrists have been trying to find a way to classify mental disorders. This task is difficult, because psychological problems are not as clear-cut as physical diseases. In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association agreed on a standard system for classifying abnormal symptoms. The most recent major revision is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth version, or **DSM-IV**. It was published in 1994. Before 1980, the two major classes of illness were *neurosis* and *psychosis*. Now those terms have been replaced by more specific categories.

The DSM-IV includes the following descriptions within each category of illness. (1) *Essential features* are characteristics that define the disorder. (2) *Associated features* are additional characteristics that usually go with the essential ones. (3) *Differential diagnosis* describes ways to tell one disorder from another similar one. (4) *Diagnostic criteria* is a list of symptoms, taken from the essential and associated features, that must be present to say that a person has that illness.

Diagnosing mental disorders is complicated. People may have more than one illness. The DSM-IV overcomes this problem by looking at someone's mental functioning in five ways, or axes. *Axis I* classifies current symptoms. *Axis II* classifies long-standing disorders. *Axis III* describes related medical conditions. *Axis IV* measures the person's current stress level. *Axis V* describes how well the person is functioning in relationships with people, on the job, and in using leisure time.

6. How is classifying mental illnesses different from classifying physical diseases?
