

Mental Health Abbreviations and Acronyms

What the short forms mean. SSRI, CBT, PTSD, DSM, and the rest, spelled out in plain English.

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Please read

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ACT = Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT, is a type of talk therapy that teaches people to accept difficult thoughts and feelings while committing to actions that match their values.

ADD = Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by ongoing patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that get in the way of daily life. It often starts in childhood and frequently continues into adulthood.

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ANS = Autonomic Nervous System

The autonomic nervous system is the part of the nervous system that runs automatically, controlling heart rate, breathing, digestion, and the stress response. It has two main branches, sympathetic and parasympathetic.

ARFID = Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder

Avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder is an eating disorder where someone limits how much or what kinds of food they eat, but not out of concern about weight or body shape.

ASD = Acute Stress Disorder

Acute stress disorder is an intense stress reaction in the first days and weeks after a traumatic event. It looks a lot like PTSD but happens sooner and is shorter, and for many people it eases with time and support.

ASPD = Antisocial personality disorder

Antisocial personality disorder is a personality pattern marked by ongoing disregard for the rights of others and for social rules. It often includes impulsivity, deceit, and trouble feeling guilt or considering consequences.

AUD = Alcohol use disorder

Alcohol use disorder is a medical condition in which a person keeps drinking despite harm to their health, relationships, or daily life. It ranges from mild to severe and is treatable.

AVPD = Avoidant personality disorder

Avoidant personality disorder is a personality pattern built around deep feelings of inadequacy and a strong fear of criticism or rejection. People with it often want closeness but hold back from relationships to avoid being hurt.

BA = Behavioral Activation

Behavioral activation is a therapy approach that helps people gradually add rewarding and meaningful activities back into their lives to counter the withdrawal and inactivity that come with depression.

BDD = Body Dysmorphic Disorder

Body dysmorphic disorder is a condition where a person becomes intensely preoccupied with a perceived flaw in their appearance that others barely notice or don't see at all. The distress is real and it's treatable.

BED = Binge Eating Disorder

Binge eating disorder involves recurring episodes of eating large amounts of food with a sense of loss of control and real distress afterward. It's the most common eating disorder, and it's treatable.

BPD = Borderline personality disorder

Borderline personality disorder is a condition marked by intense emotions, unstable relationships, impulsive behavior, and a shifting sense of self. It is treatable, and dialectical behavior therapy is a well-studied approach.

C-PTSD = Complex PTSD

Complex PTSD describes the lasting effects of repeated or prolonged trauma, often beginning in relationships a person couldn't escape. It shares features with PTSD but adds deeper struggles with emotions, self-worth, and connection.

CBT = Cognitive behavioral therapy

CBT stands for cognitive behavioral therapy. It's a structured, evidence-based form of psychotherapy that helps people identify and change unhelpful thoughts and behaviors that maintain distress.

CI = Confidence Interval

A confidence interval is a range of values that likely contains the true result. It shows how precise a study's estimate is.

DA = Dopamine

Dopamine is a chemical messenger in the brain tied to motivation, reward, and movement. It's often called the pleasure chemical, but it has more to do with wanting and pursuing than with happiness itself.

DBT = Dialectical behavior therapy

DBT stands for dialectical behavior therapy. It's a structured talk therapy that teaches skills for managing intense emotions, tolerating distress, staying present, and improving relationships.

DDD = Depersonalization-Derealization Disorder

Depersonalization-derealization disorder is a dissociative condition where someone persistently feels detached from themselves or that the world around them isn't real. It's a DSM-5-TR diagnosis.

DID = Dissociative identity disorder

Dissociative identity disorder is a condition in which a person experiences two or more distinct identity states, along with gaps in memory. It's strongly linked to severe, repeated trauma, often early in life.

DMDD = Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder

Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder is a childhood condition marked by severe, frequent temper outbursts and a persistently irritable or angry mood between them. It was added to the DSM in 2013.

DMN = Default Mode Network

The default mode network is a set of connected brain regions that becomes active when your mind is at rest and turned inward, such as during daydreaming or self-reflection.

DPDR = Depersonalization-Derealization Disorder

Depersonalization-derealization disorder is a dissociative condition where someone persistently feels detached from themselves or that the world around them isn't real. It's a DSM-5-TR diagnosis.

ECT = Electroconvulsive Therapy

Electroconvulsive therapy is a medical procedure that uses a brief electrical current to trigger a short, controlled seizure under anesthesia. It's used for severe depression and a few other serious conditions.

EMDR = Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing

EMDR, short for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, is a trauma-focused therapy that uses guided eye movements or other rhythmic cues while a person recalls distressing memories.

ERP = Exposure and Response Prevention

Exposure and Response Prevention, or ERP, is the gold-standard therapy for OCD. People face what triggers their anxiety while resisting the compulsion they'd normally do to feel relief.

GABA = gamma-aminobutyric acid

GABA is the brain's main calming, or inhibitory, neurotransmitter. It slows nerve activity down, and it's the target of medications like benzodiazepines.

GAD = Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)

Generalized anxiety disorder is persistent, excessive worry across many areas of life that's hard to control and lasts most days for at least six months. It's the worry itself that becomes the problem, not any single situation.

HPD = Histrionic Personality Disorder

Histrionic personality disorder is a long-standing pattern of excessive emotionality and attention-seeking. People with it often feel uncomfortable when they aren't the center of attention.

IED = Intermittent Explosive Disorder

Intermittent explosive disorder involves repeated, sudden outbursts of aggression or anger that are out of proportion to what set them off. It's a recognized DSM-5-TR diagnosis.

IFS = Internal Family Systems

Internal Family Systems is a therapy approach that treats the mind as made up of distinct inner parts, each with its own role. It helps a person relate to those parts from a calm, compassionate core self.

IPT = Interpersonal Therapy

Interpersonal therapy (IPT) is a structured, time-limited talk therapy. It focuses on relationships and life changes, and it has strong evidence for treating depression.

MAOI = Monoamine oxidase inhibitor

MAOI stands for monoamine oxidase inhibitor, one of the oldest classes of antidepressant. They can work well, but they require careful attention to diet and drug interactions, so they're usually reserved for when other treatments fail.

MBCT = Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) blends ideas from CBT with mindfulness practice. It has good evidence for helping prevent depression from coming back in people who've had repeated episodes.

MDD = Major depressive disorder (MDD)

Major depressive disorder is the formal diagnosis behind clinical depression, defined by at least two weeks of low mood or loss of interest along with other symptoms. It's a medical condition, not a passing mood or a personal failing.

MI = Motivational Interviewing

Motivational interviewing is a collaborative counseling style that helps a person find and strengthen their own reasons for change. It's widely used in substance use treatment and other areas where ambivalence gets in the way.

MSE = Mental Status Exam

The mental status exam is a structured observation of a person's mood, thinking, and behavior during a psychiatric evaluation. It's the mental health version of a physical exam.

NPD = Narcissistic personality disorder

Narcissistic personality disorder is a personality pattern marked by a strong need for admiration, a fragile sense of self-worth, and difficulty tuning in to other people's feelings. The confidence on the surface often sits over deeper insecurity.

OCD = Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

OCD is a condition involving obsessions, which are unwanted intrusive thoughts, and compulsions, which are repetitive rituals done to relieve the distress. The rituals bring only short-lived relief, which keeps the cycle going.

ODD = Oppositional defiant disorder

Oppositional defiant disorder is a childhood condition marked by an ongoing pattern of angry mood, argumentative or defiant behavior, and vindictiveness that goes beyond typical ups and downs.

ODD = Opioid use disorder

Opioid use disorder is a medical condition in which a person keeps using opioids despite harm to their health, relationships, or daily life. It ranges from mild to severe and is treatable.

PFC = Prefrontal Cortex

The prefrontal cortex is the front part of the brain behind the forehead. It supports planning, judgment, and impulse control, and it works closely with what psychologists call executive function.

PGD = Prolonged Grief Disorder

Prolonged grief disorder is intense, persistent grief that lasts well beyond what's expected and keeps interfering with daily life. It became a formal DSM-5-TR diagnosis in 2022.

PHP = Partial Hospitalization

Partial hospitalization is an intensive treatment program where a person spends most of the day in structured care but goes home at night. It offers more support than weekly therapy without a full hospital stay.

PMDD = Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder

Premenstrual dysphoric disorder is a severe form of premenstrual difficulty that brings intense mood and physical symptoms in the days before a period. It's a recognized medical condition, not just bad PMS, and it's treatable.

PRN = As needed

PRN means a medication is taken as needed, when symptoms come up, rather than on a fixed daily schedule. The term comes from a Latin phrase meaning as the situation demands.

PTSD = Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is a condition that can develop after a traumatic event, marked by intrusive memories, avoidance, negative shifts in mood and thinking, and a body stuck on high alert. It reflects how trauma can change the way the brain processes danger.

RCT = Randomized Controlled Trial

A randomized controlled trial is a study that randomly assigns participants to a treatment group or a comparison group. That random assignment is what makes it the strongest design for showing whether a treatment actually causes an effect.

RSD = Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria

Rejection sensitive dysphoria is an intense, painful reaction to real or perceived rejection, criticism, or failure. It's a described pattern often linked to ADHD, not a standalone diagnosis.

SAD = Seasonal affective disorder

Seasonal affective disorder is a form of depression that follows a seasonal pattern, most often arriving in the late fall and winter and easing in spring. It is more than a passing case of the winter blues.

SNRI = Serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor

SNRI stands for serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor. It's a class of antidepressant medications that adjust two brain chemicals at once and is used for depression, anxiety, and some pain conditions.

SNS = Sympathetic Nervous System

The sympathetic nervous system is the part of the body's automatic wiring that ramps up energy and alertness, especially under stress. It drives the fight-or-flight response.

SSD = Somatic symptom disorder

Somatic symptom disorder is when a person has real physical symptoms along with excessive worry, thoughts, or behaviors about them. The distress and focus on the symptoms are out of proportion and disrupt daily life.

SSRI = Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor

SSRI stands for selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor. It's a class of medications used to treat depression, anxiety disorders, OCD, PTSD, and several other conditions by adjusting how serotonin moves between nerve cells.

SUD = Substance use disorder

Substance use disorder is a condition in which a person keeps using alcohol or other drugs despite the harm it causes. It ranges from mild to severe and is treatable.

TCA = Tricyclic Antidepressant

Tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs) are an older class of antidepressant medication. They work but tend to cause more side effects than newer drugs, so they're often used after other options.

TD = Tardive Dyskinesia

Tardive dyskinesia is a movement side effect that can develop after long-term use of certain medications, causing involuntary movements often in the face, mouth, or limbs. It warrants prompt attention from a prescriber.

TMS = Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation

Transcranial magnetic stimulation is a noninvasive treatment that uses magnetic pulses to stimulate nerve cells in the brain. It's used mainly for depression that hasn't responded to medication.

TRD = Treatment-Resistant Depression

Treatment-resistant depression is depression that hasn't improved enough after trying at least two adequate antidepressant treatments. It points toward a different plan, not a hopeless situation.

TS = Tourette syndrome

Tourette syndrome is a neurological condition that causes tics, which are sudden, repeated movements or sounds a person makes without meaning to. It often begins in childhood.

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