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Everyday Language: Quick Reference

Plain-English definitions for every everyday language term on Shrinktionary, in one printable sheet.

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Please read

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Boundaries

Also: personal boundaries

Boundaries are the limits a person sets to protect their wellbeing in relationships. They define what is and isn't okay, helping people care for themselves while staying connected to others.

Burnout

Also: Occupational burnout

Burnout is a state of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced effectiveness that builds up from chronic, unmanaged stress, usually at work. It's recognized in the ICD-11 as an occupational phenomenon, not a formal mental illness.

Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is the thinking pattern of jumping to the worst-case outcome and treating it as the most likely one. It's a common feature of anxiety and depression.

Codependency

Also: Relationship addiction

Codependency is a relationship pattern where someone's sense of worth and identity gets tied to taking care of, fixing, or being needed by another person, often at their own expense. It's a popular term, not a clinical diagnosis.

Coping

Also: Coping skills, Coping strategies

Coping refers to the strategies people use to manage stress and difficult emotions. Some coping is adaptive and helps over the long run, while some is maladaptive and brings short-term relief at a longer-term cost.

Doomscrolling

Also: Doomsurfing

Doomscrolling is the habit of compulsively scrolling through negative or distressing news and social media, often unable to stop even though it makes you feel worse. It's a popular term, not a clinical diagnosis.

Emotional labor

Also: emotional work

Emotional labor is the work of managing your own feelings, and often other people's, as part of a job or relationship. It isn't a diagnosis, but too much of it can lead to burnout.

Gaslighting

Also: Reality manipulation

Gaslighting is a pattern of manipulation that leads someone to doubt their own memory, perception, or judgment. The word started in psychology but is now used casually for many kinds of dishonesty.

High-functioning anxiety

Also: Hidden anxiety

High-functioning anxiety is a popular label for people who feel persistent anxiety on the inside while looking capable and put-together on the outside. It's not a formal diagnosis.

Imposter Syndrome

Also: Impostor syndrome, Imposter phenomenon

Imposter syndrome is the persistent feeling of being a fraud who will be found out, even when there's clear evidence of your competence. It's a widely recognized experience, but it isn't a formal clinical diagnosis.

Inner child

Also: Inner child work

The inner child is a popular way of describing the part of you that still carries the feelings, needs, and reactions formed in childhood. It's a metaphor used in some therapies, not a clinical diagnosis.

Languishing

Also: Blah feeling

Languishing is a sense of stagnation and emptiness, feeling joyless and aimless without being clinically depressed. It's a popular term drawn from psychology, not a formal diagnosis.

Love bombing

Also: Idealization phase

Love bombing is an overwhelming rush of affection, attention, and grand gestures early in a relationship, often used to gain control rather than to connect. It's a popular term, not a clinical diagnosis.

Masking

Also: camouflaging, social camouflaging

Masking is when a person hides or covers up their natural traits, feelings, or behaviors to fit in or meet social expectations. It comes up often in conversations about autism and ADHD, but anyone can do it.

Mood

Also: emotional state

Mood is a person's general emotional state over a stretch of time, like feeling low, irritable, or content. It's more lasting and less specific than a single emotion.

Nervous Breakdown

Also: Mental breakdown, Emotional breakdown

Nervous breakdown is an old, everyday phrase for a period of overwhelming distress when someone can't function. It isn't a clinical or diagnostic term.

Overstimulation

Also: sensory overload

Overstimulation is when your senses or mind take in more input than you can comfortably handle. It isn't a diagnosis, but it can leave you frazzled, irritable, or shut down.

Overthinking

Also: Worry loops, Analysis paralysis

Overthinking is the everyday word for getting stuck in loops of worry or replaying the same thoughts without reaching a useful conclusion. It's a normal human habit that can tip into a clinical concern when it's constant and hard to switch off.

People-pleasing

Also: fawning

People-pleasing is a habit of prioritizing others' needs and approval over your own, often to avoid conflict or rejection. It isn't a diagnosis, but it can wear a person down.

Perfectionism

Also: perfectionist tendencies

Perfectionism is holding yourself to standards so high that nothing feels good enough. It isn't a diagnosis, but it can fuel anxiety, burnout, and harsh self-criticism.

Self-Care

Also: Self-maintenance

Self-care is the deliberate, ordinary set of actions people take to maintain their physical and mental health. It supports treatment but doesn't replace it.

Self-compassion

Also: self-kindness

Self-compassion is treating yourself with the same kindness you'd offer a friend who's struggling. It isn't a diagnosis or a treatment, but it's a skill many find steadying.

Self-sabotage

Also: self-defeating behavior

Self-sabotage is when a person gets in their own way, undermining goals they say they want. It isn't a diagnosis, but it can quietly stall work, health, and relationships.

Stress

Also: Stress response

Stress is the body and mind's response to a demand or pressure. Short bursts are normal and even useful, but stress that never lets up can harm your health.

Toxic positivity

Also: Forced positivity

Toxic positivity is the pressure to stay upbeat and dismiss difficult emotions, treating positive thinking as the only acceptable response. It's a popular term, not a clinical diagnosis.

Trauma bonding

Also: Betrayal bond

Trauma bonding is a strong emotional attachment that forms toward someone who is harmful, built through repeated cycles of abuse and intermittent kindness. It's a popular term, not a clinical diagnosis.

Trauma dumping

Also: Emotional dumping

Trauma dumping is when someone unloads heavy or distressing personal details on another person without warning, consent, or much regard for whether they can hold it. It's a popular term, not a clinical diagnosis.

Triggered

Also: Set off, Activated

Triggered describes what happens when a cue sets off a strong trauma or anxiety response, pulling someone back into past pain. In everyday speech the word often gets used more loosely to mean simply annoyed or offended.

Worry

Also: Worrying

Worry is the chain of what-if thoughts about things that might go wrong. A little helps you plan, but too much loops without landing on an answer.

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