SHRINKTIONARY

Psychiatry Terms: Quick Reference

Plain-English definitions for every psychiatry terms term on Shrinktionary, in one printable sheet.

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Created and reviewed under the direction of Shariq Refai, MD, MBA, FAPA, a board certified psychiatrist.

Please read

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Biopsychosocial Model

Also: BPS model

The biopsychosocial model is a way of understanding mental health that looks at biological, psychological, and social factors together. It treats a person as a whole rather than a single cause.

Clinically significant

Also: Clinical significance

Clinically significant means symptoms are causing enough distress, or getting in the way of life enough, to matter medically. It's the line between a hard time and something that meets the bar for a diagnosis.

Comorbidity

Also: Co-occurring conditions, Co-occurring disorders

Comorbidity means two or more health conditions occurring in the same person at the same time. In mental health, it often changes how treatment is planned and sequenced.

Contraindication

Also: Reason to avoid

A contraindication is a reason a treatment shouldn't be used because it could cause harm. It can be absolute, meaning never use it, or relative, meaning use it only with extra caution.

Course of illness

Also: Clinical course, Course

Course of illness is the pattern a condition follows over time, including whether it comes in episodes, stays steady, or shifts. It's what a clinician uses to plan treatment and know what to watch for.

Diagnostic criteria

Also: Criteria, Meeting criteria

Diagnostic criteria are the specific things that have to be present, and for how long, before a condition can be diagnosed. When a clinician says someone meets criteria, they mean the person's situation lines up with that defined list.

Differential Diagnosis

Also: Differential

Differential diagnosis is the clinical process of distinguishing among conditions that share similar symptoms. It's how a clinician decides which diagnosis best explains what a person is experiencing.

DSM-5-TR

Also: DSM, DSM-5, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

The DSM-5-TR is the handbook clinicians in the US use to name and define mental health conditions. It sets out what each diagnosis is called and what has to be present to make it, so different clinicians are describing the same thing.

Electroconvulsive Therapy

Also: ECT

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.

Episode

Also: Mood episode

An episode is a defined stretch of time when symptoms are present at a level that counts clinically. It has a beginning and an end, which is what separates it from a condition that runs continuously.

Etiology

Also: Cause, Aetiology

Etiology is the cause of a condition, or more often the mix of causes. In mental health it's rarely one thing, so etiology usually means the combination of biological, psychological, and social factors that led here.

Formulation

Also: Case formulation, Clinical formulation

A formulation is a clinician's working explanation of why a person is struggling, drawing together their history, biology, thoughts, and circumstances. It guides treatment in a way a diagnosis alone can't.

Functional impairment

Also: Impairment, Functional decline

Functional impairment is when symptoms get in the way of ordinary life, like work, school, relationships, or self-care. It's one of the main things clinicians weigh when deciding whether something is a diagnosis and how serious it is.

Informed Consent

Also: Consent to treatment

Informed consent is the process of giving you the information you need to agree to a treatment freely and with understanding. It covers what's being recommended, the risks and benefits, and the alternatives.

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Levels of Care

Also: Continuum of care, Treatment settings

Levels of care describe the range of mental health treatment settings, from a weekly outpatient visit to round-the-clock hospital care. The right level depends on how much support and safety a person needs.

Mental Status Exam

Also: MSE

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.

Onset

Also: Age of onset

Onset is when a condition or an episode starts. Clinicians pay close attention to it because how fast symptoms appeared, and at what age, helps point toward what's actually going on.

Partial Hospitalization

Also: PHP, Day program

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.

PRN

Also: 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.

Prodrome

Also: Early warning signs

A prodrome is the early, subtle warning signs that show up before a full episode of illness. Recognizing them can create a window to act before symptoms fully take hold.

Prognosis

Also: Expected outcome, Clinical outlook

Prognosis is the likely course and outcome of a condition over time. It's an informed estimate based on patterns, not a fixed prediction of what will happen to one person.

Provisional diagnosis

Also: Working diagnosis

A provisional diagnosis is a working diagnosis a clinician records when the picture fits but information is still missing. It's meant to be confirmed or changed as more becomes clear.

Relapse

Also: Recurrence

Relapse is the return of symptoms after a period of improvement or recovery. It's common across many conditions and is best treated as a setback to manage, not a personal failure.

Remission

Also: Symptom remission

Remission is when symptoms drop below the threshold needed for a diagnosis, either partly or fully. It usually means the condition is well controlled, not that treatment can stop.

Severity

Also: Severity specifier

Severity describes how intense a condition is, usually recorded as mild, moderate, or severe. It's based on how many symptoms are present and how much they're interfering with daily life.

Specifier

Also: Diagnostic specifier

A specifier is an add-on label that makes a diagnosis more precise. It describes a feature of the condition, like how severe it is or when it started, without changing the diagnosis itself.

Syndrome

Also: Clinical syndrome

A syndrome is a group of symptoms that tend to show up together in a recognizable pattern. Naming the pattern lets clinicians study and treat it, even when the underlying cause isn't fully known.

Titration

Also: Dose titration, Dose adjustment

Titration is the gradual adjustment of a medication dose, up or down, to find the level that balances benefit against side effects. It's managed by the prescriber, not done on your own.

Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation

Also: TMS

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.

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Treatment-Resistant Depression

Also: TRD

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.

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