SHRINKTIONARY

The Plain-English Mental Health and Psychiatry Dictionary

Every symptom, condition, medication, therapy, and psychiatry term on Shrinktionary, written in plain English and arranged A to Z.

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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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A

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Also: ACT

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.

Acute Stress Disorder

Also: ASD

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.

ADHD

Also: Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, ADD

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.

Adjustment Disorder

Also: Situational depression

Adjustment disorder is a strong emotional reaction to a stressful life change that goes beyond what's expected and gets in the way of daily life. It usually eases once a person adapts or the stressor passes.

Agitation

Also: Psychomotor agitation

Agitation is a state of inner restlessness and tension that often comes with increased movement, like pacing or fidgeting. It can be a symptom of many physical and mental health conditions.

Agoraphobia

Also: Fear of open or public spaces

Agoraphobia is an anxiety disorder marked by intense fear of situations where escape might be hard or help unavailable if panic-like symptoms strike. People often start avoiding those situations, which can shrink daily life over time.

Akathisia

Also: Inner restlessness

Akathisia is a distressing sense of inner restlessness, often with a strong urge to keep moving. It's a side effect that can come from certain psychiatric medications and warrants prompt attention.

Alcohol use disorder

Also: AUD, Alcoholism

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.

Alogia

Also: Poverty of speech

Alogia is a marked drop in the amount of speech a person produces. It's a negative symptom most often linked to schizophrenia, where answers become brief, sparse, and hard to draw out.

Alprazolam (Xanax)

Also: Xanax

Alprazolam is a fast-acting benzodiazepine, sold as Xanax, used for anxiety and panic. It works within minutes, which is both why people rely on it and why it's meant for short-term use.

Amitriptyline (Elavil)

Also: Elavil

Amitriptyline is an older tricyclic antidepressant, sold as Elavil. It's now used mostly off-label at low doses for sleep and for chronic pain, because its side effects are heavy.

Amphetamine (Adderall)

Also: Adderall, dextroamphetamine

Amphetamine is a stimulant medication for ADHD, sold as Adderall. It's one of the two main stimulant families, and it's a controlled substance.

Amygdala

Also: Amygdalae

The amygdala is a small region deep in the brain that helps detect threat and drive fear. It plays a central role in anxiety and the body's stress response.

Anhedonia

Anhedonia is the loss of pleasure or interest in things you used to enjoy. It's a core symptom of depression and shows up in several other conditions.

Anorexia Nervosa

Also: Anorexia

Anorexia nervosa is a serious eating disorder marked by an intense fear of weight gain and a distorted view of one's body, leading to restriction that harms physical and mental health. It's treatable, and early help matters.

Anticholinergic

Also: anticholinergic effects, anticholinergic burden

Anticholinergic describes a medication effect that blocks acetylcholine, a chemical messenger. It's the reason a drug can cause dry mouth, constipation, blurry vision, and foggy thinking.

Antidepressant

Also: depression medication

An antidepressant is a medication used to treat depression and many anxiety conditions. It's an umbrella term that covers several drug classes, including SSRIs and SNRIs.

Antipsychotic

Also: neuroleptic

An antipsychotic is a medication used to treat psychosis and to help manage bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Some are also added to other treatments to boost their effect.

Antisocial personality disorder

Also: ASPD, Sociopathy

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.

Anxiety

Also: Anxiety disorder

Anxiety is the body and mind's response to perceived threat or uncertainty. It becomes a clinical condition when it's persistent, out of proportion to the situation, and gets in the way of daily life.

Anxiolytic

Also: anti-anxiety medication

An anxiolytic is a medication used to reduce anxiety. The word covers several very different drugs, from fast-acting benzodiazepines to daily medications that take weeks to work.

Anxious attachment

Also: anxious-preoccupied attachment

Anxious attachment is a relationship style marked by a strong fear of being left and a deep need for reassurance. It's an attachment pattern from attachment theory, not a diagnosis.

Aripiprazole (Abilify)

Also: Abilify

Aripiprazole is an atypical antipsychotic, sold as Abilify, used for bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, and as an add-on for depression that hasn't responded to an antidepressant alone.

Atomoxetine (Strattera)

Also: Strattera

Atomoxetine is a non-stimulant medication for ADHD, sold as Strattera. It's taken daily, it takes weeks to work, and it isn't a controlled substance.

Attachment

Also: Attachment style

Attachment is the emotional bond that forms between a child and their main caregivers. The patterns set early on can shape how a person relates to others later in life.

Atypical Antidepressant

Also: Other antidepressant

An atypical antidepressant is a medication that treats depression but doesn't fit neatly into the older drug classes like SSRIs or tricyclics. These medications work through different chemical pathways in the brain.

Augmentation

Also: Add-on therapy, Adjunctive treatment

Augmentation is the practice of adding a second medication to boost the effect of one that's only partly working. It's a way to improve a treatment without abandoning a drug that's helping a little.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Also: ASD, Autism

Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental difference in how a person communicates, relates to others, and processes the world. It's present from early childhood and shows up in a wide range of ways from one person to the next.

Autonomic Nervous System

Also: ANS

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.

Avoidance

Also: Avoidant coping, Avoidant behavior

Avoidance is steering clear of situations, places, people, or thoughts that feel frightening or distressing. It tends to bring quick relief but keeps fear alive over time, which is why it sits at the center of anxiety.

Avoidant attachment

Also: dismissive-avoidant attachment

Avoidant attachment is a relationship style marked by strong self-reliance and discomfort with closeness. It's an attachment pattern from attachment theory, not a diagnosis.

Avoidant personality disorder

Also: AVPD

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.

Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder

Also: ARFID

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.

Avolition

Avolition is a significant drop in the ability to start or sustain goal-directed activity. It's a symptom seen in conditions like schizophrenia and depression, not a diagnosis.

B

Behavioral Activation

Also: BA

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.

Benzodiazepine

Also: Benzos

Benzodiazepines are a class of fast-acting medications that calm the nervous system. They can quickly ease anxiety, panic, and insomnia, but carry a risk of dependence and are usually meant for short-term use.

Beta-Blocker

Also: Beta blocker, Beta-adrenergic blocker

Beta-blockers are medications first developed for heart and blood pressure problems. In mental health they're sometimes used off-label to calm physical anxiety symptoms like a racing heart or shaky hands.

Bias

Also: Systematic error

In research, bias is a systematic error that pushes a study's results in a particular direction. It distorts findings in ways that random chance doesn't.

Binge Eating Disorder

Also: BED

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.

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.

Bipolar disorder

Also: Manic-depressive illness

Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder involving episodes of depression alternating with periods of mania or hypomania, which are times of unusually high or irritable mood and energy. Telling it apart from ordinary depression matters because the treatments differ.

Black Box Warning

Also: Boxed warning, Black-box warning

A black box warning is the strongest safety warning the FDA can put on a medication. It flags a serious possible risk, but it doesn't mean the drug is banned or that the risk happens to everyone.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder

Also: BDD

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.

Borderline personality disorder

Also: BPD, Emotionally unstable 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.

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.

Brain fog

Also: Mental fog, Cognitive fog
Brain fog is an everyday term for feeling mentally cloudy, with trouble concentrating, remembering, or thinking clearly. It's a symptom, not a diagnosis, and has many possible causes.

Bulimia Nervosa

Also: Bulimia
Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder involving cycles of eating that feels out of control followed by attempts to undo it. It often carries deep shame, and it's treatable.

Bupropion (Wellbutrin)

Also: Wellbutrin, Zyban
Bupropion is an atypical antidepressant, sold as Wellbutrin, that works on norepinephrine and dopamine instead of serotonin. It's also used to help people stop smoking.

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.

Buspirone (BuSpar)

Also: BuSpar
Buspirone is a daily anti-anxiety medication, sold as BuSpar, used for generalized anxiety. It isn't sedating and isn't habit-forming, but it takes weeks to work.

C

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.

Catatonia

Catatonia is a syndrome of marked changes in movement, speech, and responsiveness. It can occur with psychiatric and medical conditions and is treatable, often quickly.

CBT

Also: 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.

Circadian Rhythm

Also: body clock, sleep-wake cycle
The circadian rhythm is the body's roughly 24-hour internal clock. It guides the sleep-wake cycle along with daily shifts in alertness, hormones, and body temperature.

Citalopram (Celexa)

Also: Celexa
Citalopram is an SSRI antidepressant, sold as Celexa, used mainly for depression. It's closely related to escitalopram, which is a frequent source of mix-ups.

Classical Conditioning

Also: Pavlovian conditioning
Classical conditioning is learning by association, where a neutral cue gets paired with something meaningful until the cue alone triggers a response. It helps explain how some fears and phobias form.

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.

Clonazepam (Klonopin)

Also: Klonopin
Clonazepam is a long-acting benzodiazepine, sold as Klonopin, used for panic disorder and some seizure conditions. It lasts longer than most others in its class.

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.

Cognitive Distortion

Also: Thinking trap, Unhelpful thinking style

A cognitive distortion is a habitual, biased way of thinking that paints a situation as worse or more extreme than it really is. These patterns are a main target of cognitive behavioral therapy.

Cognitive Flexibility

Also: mental flexibility

Cognitive flexibility is the mental ability to shift thinking, adapt to change, and switch between ideas or tasks. It's a core part of executive function.

Cognitive Restructuring

Also: cognitive reframing

Cognitive restructuring is a core CBT skill for spotting distorted or unhelpful thoughts and reshaping them into more balanced, realistic ones.

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.

Complex PTSD

Also: C-PTSD, Complex post-traumatic stress disorder

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.

Compulsion

Also: Compulsive behavior, Ritual

A compulsion is a repetitive behavior or mental act a person feels driven to do in order to ease distress or prevent something bad from happening. Compulsions sit at the heart of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Confidence Interval

Also: CI

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

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.

Controlled substance

Also: scheduled drug

A controlled substance is a medication the government regulates more tightly because it carries a risk of misuse or dependence. It affects how it's prescribed and refilled, not whether it's legitimate.

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.

Correlation and Causation

Also: Correlation versus causation

Correlation means two things tend to move together. Causation means one actually makes the other happen. A correlation alone doesn't prove cause.

Cortisol

Also: Stress hormone

Cortisol is the body's main stress hormone. It is released through a system called the HPA axis, and staying elevated for too long can take a toll on health.

Couples Therapy

Also: Couples counseling, Marriage counseling

Couples therapy is counseling for two partners working on their relationship together. It helps them understand recurring conflicts, communicate better, and decide how they want to move forward.

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.

Cyclothymia

Also: Cyclothymic disorder

Cyclothymia is a milder, long-lasting mood condition with many ups and downs that don't reach the full intensity of mania or major depression. The shifts are real and persistent, just less severe than in bipolar disorder.

D

DBT

Also: 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.

Default Mode Network

Also: DMN

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.

Defense Mechanism

Also: ego defense

A defense mechanism is an unconscious mental strategy the mind uses to protect itself from anxiety, conflict, or distressing thoughts. Common examples include denial, projection, and rationalization.

Delirium

Delirium is a sudden, fluctuating change in attention and awareness, usually caused by a medical problem. It comes on fast and tends to come and go through the day.

Delusion

Also: Delusional belief

A delusion is a fixed false belief that a person holds firmly even when there's clear evidence it isn't true. It's a core feature of psychosis.

Delusional Disorder

Delusional disorder is a psychotic condition where someone holds one or more fixed false beliefs for at least a month, while the rest of their functioning stays relatively intact. It's a DSM-5-TR diagnosis.

Depersonalization

Also: Feeling detached from yourself

Depersonalization is a feeling of being detached from yourself, as if you're watching your own thoughts, body, or actions from the outside. It's a common stress and anxiety reaction.

Depersonalization-Derealization Disorder

Also: DDD, DPDR

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.

Depression

Also: Major depressive disorder, Clinical depression

Depression is a persistent state of low mood, loss of interest, and decreased function that goes beyond ordinary sadness. It's a recognized medical condition, not a character weakness.

Derealization

Also: Feeling unreal, Dreamlike feeling

Derealization is the sense that the world around you isn't quite real, as if you're seeing it through glass or in a dream. It's a form of dissociation and a common response to stress, anxiety, or trauma.

Desvenlafaxine (Pristiq)

Also: Pristiq

Desvenlafaxine is an SNRI antidepressant, sold as Pristiq. It's the active form your body converts venlafaxine into, which is why the two are so closely related.

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.

Diazepam (Valium)

Also: Valium

Diazepam is a long-acting benzodiazepine, sold as Valium, used for anxiety, muscle spasm, seizures, and alcohol withdrawal. It's the oldest name most people recognize in the class.

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.

Discontinuation syndrome

Also: Antidepressant discontinuation syndrome

Discontinuation syndrome is the set of temporary symptoms that can appear when an antidepressant is stopped too quickly. It isn't addiction, and it's usually prevented by tapering the dose gradually with a prescriber.

Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder

Also: DMDD

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.

Dissociation

Also: Feeling detached, Depersonalization

Dissociation is a sense of feeling detached from yourself, your body, or your surroundings, as if reality has gone foggy or unreal. It's a nervous-system response that ranges from brief and ordinary to a sign of a clinical condition.

Dissociative identity disorder

Also: DID, Multiple personality 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.

Distress tolerance

Also: Crisis survival skills

Distress tolerance is a set of DBT skills for getting through intense emotional pain without making things worse. It's about surviving a crisis, not solving it in the moment.

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.

Dopamine

Also: DA

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.

Double-Blind

Also: Double-blinded, Double-masked

Double-blind means neither the participants nor the researchers know who is getting the real treatment versus the comparison during a study. Hiding this reduces bias and makes results more trustworthy.

Doxepin (Silenor)

Also: Silenor

Doxepin is a tricyclic antidepressant that, at very low doses, is used as a non-habit-forming sleep medication for staying asleep. The dose is what changes what it does.

Drug interaction

Also: drug-drug interaction

A drug interaction is when one substance changes how another one works in the body. It can make a medication stronger, weaker, or riskier, and it isn't always intuitive.

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.

Duloxetine (Cymbalta)

Also: Cymbalta

Duloxetine is an SNRI antidepressant, sold as Cymbalta. It's used for depression and anxiety, and also for several chronic pain conditions, which is unusual for an antidepressant.

E

Effect Size

Also: Magnitude of effect

Effect size is a number that describes how large an effect is, not just whether it exists. It tells you whether a result is big enough to matter in real life.

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.

EMDR

Also: 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.

Emotional blunting

Also: Emotional numbing, Blunted affect

Emotional blunting is a flattening of feeling, where both highs and lows are muted and emotions feel muffled or far away. It can come from depression, trauma, or as a side effect of some medications.

Emotional Dysregulation

Emotional dysregulation is difficulty managing the intensity, duration, or timing of emotions. It's a feature of several conditions rather than a standalone 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.

Emotional Numbness

Also: Emotional blunting, Feeling emotionally flat

Emotional numbness is a feeling of being emotionally flat, blank, or cut off from your feelings. It's common in depression, trauma, and high stress.

Emotional Regulation

Also: Emotion regulation, Affect regulation

Emotional regulation is the ability to influence which emotions you feel, how strongly you feel them, and how you express them. It is a major focus of dialectical behavior therapy.

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.

Escitalopram (Lexapro)

Also: Lexapro

Escitalopram is an SSRI antidepressant, sold as Lexapro, used for depression and generalized anxiety disorder. It's often chosen as a starting point because it tends to be well tolerated.

Eszopiclone (Lunesta)

Also: Lunesta

Eszopiclone is a Z-drug, sold as Lunesta, that helps with both falling asleep and staying asleep. It's known for leaving a distinctive bitter taste in the mouth.

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.

Executive function

Executive function is the set of mental skills that lets you plan, focus, switch tasks, hold information in mind, and resist distraction. It's how the brain runs the day.

Exposure and Response Prevention

Also: ERP

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.

Exposure Therapy

Also: Exposure-based therapy, Exposure and response prevention (ERP)

Exposure therapy is a structured form of cognitive behavioral therapy where a person gradually and repeatedly faces feared situations, objects, or thoughts so the fear response can fade over time.

F

Family Therapy

Also: Family counseling, Systemic therapy

Family therapy is a form of counseling that treats relationships and patterns within a family rather than one person alone. It helps families communicate better and support a member who's struggling.

Fatigue

Also: Exhaustion, Low energy

Fatigue is a deep, persistent tiredness or lack of energy that rest doesn't fully fix. It's a common symptom of many physical and mental health conditions, including depression.

Fight-or-Flight

Also: Acute stress response, Fight, flight, or freeze response

Fight-or-flight is the body's automatic survival response to a perceived threat. It floods the system with stress hormones to prepare a person to confront danger or escape it.

First-line treatment

Also: first-line, front-line treatment

A first-line treatment is the one usually tried first for a condition, because the balance of evidence, effectiveness, and safety puts it there. It isn't the same as the best treatment for you.

Flashback

Also: Re-experiencing, Reliving

A flashback is an involuntary, vivid re-experiencing of a traumatic event, where it feels like the past is happening again right now. Flashbacks are a hallmark feature of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Flat Affect

Also: Blunted affect, Affective flattening

Flat affect is a marked reduction in outward emotional expression, such as a still face, flat voice, and little gesturing. It's a symptom seen in several conditions, not a diagnosis.

Fluoxetine (Prozac)

Also: Prozac

Fluoxetine is an SSRI antidepressant, sold as Prozac, used for depression, OCD, panic, and bulimia. It's known for an unusually long half-life, which means it leaves the body slowly.

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.

G

GABA

Also: 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.

Gambling disorder

Also: Compulsive gambling, Problem gambling

Gambling disorder is a condition in which a person keeps gambling despite serious harm to their finances, relationships, or well-being. It's recognized as a behavioral addiction and is treatable.

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.

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)

Also: 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.

Generic drug

Also: generic, generic medication

A generic drug is a medication sold under its chemical name rather than a brand name. It contains the same active ingredient as the brand and has to meet the same FDA standards, usually at a much lower price.

Glutamate

Also: glutamic acid

Glutamate is the brain's main excitatory neurotransmitter, the chemical messenger that speeds up signaling between nerve cells. It plays a central role in learning and memory.

Grandiosity

Also: grandiose thinking

Grandiosity is an inflated sense of one's own importance, power, or abilities. It's a common symptom in the mania of bipolar disorder.

Grounding techniques

Also: Grounding skills

Grounding techniques are simple coping skills that use the senses and the present moment to pull you out of overwhelming anxiety, dissociation, or flashbacks and back into the here and now.

Group Therapy

Also: Group psychotherapy

Group therapy is treatment delivered to several people at once with a trained therapist. Members work on shared goals while learning from each other's experiences.

Guanfacine (Intuniv)

Also: Intuniv, Tenex

Guanfacine is a non-stimulant ADHD medication, sold as Intuniv. It's often used on its own or added to a stimulant, and it can help with the irritability and emotional flare-ups that come with ADHD.

Gut-Brain Axis

The gut-brain axis is the two-way communication system between your digestive tract and your brain. It links how you feel emotionally with what happens in your gut.

H

Habituation

Also: getting used to it

Habituation is when your response to something fades after you're exposed to it again and again. The brain learns it can stop reacting.

Half-Life

Also: Elimination half-life

Half-life is the time it takes for the amount of a drug in your body to drop by half. It helps explain how often a medication is taken and how long it lingers after the last dose.

Hallucination

Also: Sensory hallucination

A hallucination is sensing something that isn't actually there, such as hearing voices or seeing things that other people don't. It can affect any of the senses.

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.

Hippocampus

The hippocampus is a brain region central to forming and storing memories. It's sensitive to chronic stress and is often studied in connection with depression and PTSD.

Histrionic Personality Disorder

Also: HPD

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.

Hoarding disorder

Also: Compulsive hoarding

Hoarding disorder is an ongoing difficulty parting with possessions, no matter their actual value, because getting rid of them feels too distressing. Over time the clutter can fill living spaces and make them hard to use.

Hopelessness

Also: feeling hopeless

Hopelessness is the feeling that things won't improve and that the future holds nothing better. It's a common symptom of depression and can be a warning sign worth taking seriously.

HPA Axis

Also: hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis

The HPA axis is the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal system, the body's central stress response network. It controls the release of cortisol and helps the body react to stress.

Hydroxyzine (Vistaril)

Also: Vistaril, Atarax

Hydroxyzine is an antihistamine, sold as Vistaril or Atarax, used for anxiety. It works fairly quickly and carries no dependence risk, which is why it's used as a benzodiazepine alternative.

Hyperarousal

Also: Hyperarousal state

Hyperarousal is a state of being constantly keyed up and on guard, as if danger is always near. It's a core feature of PTSD and shows up in anxiety, with a body stuck in a threat-ready mode.

Hypersomnia

Also: excessive sleepiness, oversleeping

Hypersomnia is excessive sleepiness, including sleeping much longer than usual or feeling unrefreshed despite plenty of sleep. It can be a symptom of depression and other conditions.

Hyperventilation

Also: Overbreathing

Hyperventilation is breathing faster or deeper than the body needs, which lowers carbon dioxide in the blood and produces dizziness, tingling, and a sense of breathlessness. It's a common driver of panic symptoms.

Hypervigilance

Hypervigilance is a state in which the nervous system stays on high alert for threats, even when the environment is safe. It's a core feature of trauma-related conditions and shows up in anxiety disorders.

Hypomania

Also: Hypomanic episode

Hypomania is a milder, shorter form of mania, with elevated mood and energy that's noticeable but less severe. It's central to bipolar II disorder.

I

Illness Anxiety Disorder

Also: Hypochondria, Health anxiety

Illness anxiety disorder is a persistent preoccupation with having or developing a serious illness, even when little or no physical symptoms are present. It was formerly known as hypochondria.

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.

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.

Inhibition

Also: Inhibitory control, Response inhibition

Inhibition is the mental skill of holding back an automatic response, resisting a distraction, or stopping an impulse. It's one of the core components of executive function.

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.

Insomnia

Also: Sleeplessness, Insomnia disorder

Insomnia is ongoing trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or getting restful sleep, paired with daytime effects like fatigue or poor focus. It often travels alongside depression and anxiety, and it responds well to a focused therapy called CBT-I.

Intergenerational Trauma

Also: Transgenerational trauma, Generational trauma

Intergenerational trauma is the passing of the effects of trauma from one generation to the next through behavior, relationships, and environment. It's a described concept, not a formal diagnosis.

Intermittent Explosive Disorder

Also: IED

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.

Internal Family Systems

Also: IFS, Parts work

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.

Interpersonal Therapy

Also: IPT, Interpersonal psychotherapy

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.

Intrusive Thought

Also: Unwanted thoughts

An intrusive thought is an unwanted, often distressing thought or image that pops into your mind on its own. They're extremely common and don't reflect what you actually want or intend to do.

Irritability

Also: Irritable mood

Irritability is a heightened tendency to feel annoyed, impatient, or quick to anger over small things. It's a common symptom across many physical and mental health conditions.

L

Lamotrigine (Lamictal)

Also: Lamictal

Lamotrigine is a mood stabilizer, sold as Lamictal, used mainly to prevent the depressive episodes of bipolar disorder. It has to be started slowly because of a rare but serious rash.

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.

Learned Helplessness

Also: Helplessness response

Learned helplessness is what happens when repeated, uncontrollable stress teaches a person or animal to stop trying, even once escape becomes possible. It's closely linked to depression.

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.

Limbic System

Also: emotional brain

The limbic system is a group of connected brain structures involved in emotion, motivation, and memory. It includes regions like the amygdala and hippocampus that help process feelings and form memories.

Lisdexamfetamine (Vyvanse)

Also: Vyvanse

Lisdexamfetamine is a long-acting stimulant for ADHD, sold as Vyvanse. It's inactive until the body converts it, which gives it a smoother, longer effect. It's also approved for binge eating disorder.

Lithium

Also: lithium carbonate

Lithium is a foundational mood stabilizer used to treat bipolar disorder. It needs regular blood monitoring, and the dose should never be adjusted on your own.

Locus of Control

Also: sense of control

Locus of control is how much you believe you can shape what happens to you. Some people feel in charge of outcomes; others feel life mostly happens to them.

Lorazepam (Ativan)

Also: Ativan

Lorazepam is a benzodiazepine, sold as Ativan, used for anxiety. Like others in its class, it's meant mainly for short-term or occasional use.

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.

Low self-esteem

Also: poor self-esteem

Low self-esteem is a persistently negative view of one's own worth and abilities. It isn't a diagnosis on its own, but it often travels with anxiety and depression.

M

Maintenance treatment

Also: maintenance phase, maintenance therapy

Maintenance treatment is staying on a treatment after you've gotten better, to keep the illness from coming back. It's the phase people are most tempted to quit.

Major depressive disorder (MDD)

Also: Clinical depression, 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.

Mania

Also: Manic episode

Mania is a distinct period of abnormally elevated, expansive, or irritable mood along with high energy. It's a hallmark of bipolar I disorder.

MAOI

Also: Monoamine oxidase inhibitor, MAOIs

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.

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.

Medication adherence

Also: adherence, compliance

Medication adherence is how closely someone actually takes a medication the way it was prescribed. Most people are imperfect at it, and the reasons are usually practical rather than stubborn.

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.

Meta-Analysis

Also: Pooled analysis

A meta-analysis is a study that statistically combines the results of many separate studies on the same question. Pooling the data gives a clearer, more reliable estimate than any single study can on its own.

Metacognition

Also: thinking about thinking

Metacognition is thinking about your own thinking. It's the ability to notice, monitor, and adjust how your mind is working.

Methylphenidate (Ritalin, Concerta)

Also: Ritalin, Concerta

Methylphenidate is a stimulant medication for ADHD, sold as Ritalin and Concerta. It's the other main stimulant family alongside amphetamine.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

Also: MBCT

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.

Mirtazapine (Remeron)

Also: Remeron

Mirtazapine is an atypical antidepressant, sold as Remeron, often chosen when depression comes with poor sleep and lost appetite. It tends to be sedating and to increase appetite.

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.

Mood Stabilizer

Also: mood-stabilizing medication

A mood stabilizer is a medication used mainly in bipolar disorder to even out the highs and lows. Lithium is one of the best-known examples.

Motivation

Also: drive

Motivation is what gets you to start, keep going, and put effort into something. It's the why behind your actions.

Motivational Interviewing

Also: MI

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.

N

Narcissistic personality disorder

Also: NPD

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.

Narcolepsy

Narcolepsy is a chronic neurological condition that affects the brain's control of sleep and wakefulness. It causes severe daytime sleepiness and sudden urges to sleep.

NDRI

Also: norepinephrine-dopamine reuptake inhibitor

NDRI stands for norepinephrine-dopamine reuptake inhibitor. It's a small antidepressant class, best known for bupropion, that works on norepinephrine and dopamine instead of serotonin.

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.

Neuroplasticity

Also: Brain plasticity, Neural plasticity

Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change itself in response to experience, learning, and practice. It is a big part of why therapy and new habits can work.

Neurotransmitter

Also: chemical messenger

A neurotransmitter is a chemical messenger that nerve cells use to send signals to one another. These molecules help control mood, thinking, movement, sleep, and much of what the brain and body do.

Norepinephrine

Also: noradrenaline

Norepinephrine is a chemical that works as both a neurotransmitter and a stress hormone. It plays a key role in alertness, attention, and the body's fight-or-flight response.

O

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

Also: 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.

OCPD (obsessive-compulsive personality disorder)

Also: Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, Anankastic personality disorder

OCPD is a personality pattern built around perfectionism, control, and rigid rules. People with it often hold very high standards for themselves and others, sometimes at the cost of flexibility and relationships.

Off-Label

Also: Off-label use, Off-label prescribing

Off-label means a doctor prescribes an approved medication for a use the FDA hasn't formally approved. It's common, legal, and often backed by real evidence and clinical experience.

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.

Operant Conditioning

Also: Instrumental conditioning

Operant conditioning is learning through consequences. Behaviors that get rewarded tend to happen more often, and behaviors that get punished tend to happen less.

Opioid use disorder

Also: OUD

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.

Oppositional defiant disorder

Also: ODD

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.

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.

Oxytocin

Also: the bonding hormone

Oxytocin is a hormone and brain chemical involved in bonding, trust, and social connection. It also plays roles in childbirth and breastfeeding.

P

P-Value

Also: Probability value

A p-value is a statistic that estimates how likely a result would be if there were no real effect. It's widely misunderstood and often mistaken for proof.

Panic attack

A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense fear or discomfort that peaks within minutes and includes strong physical symptoms. It's not dangerous, even though it can feel like it is.

Panic disorder

Also: Panic syndrome

Panic disorder is a condition involving recurrent, unexpected panic attacks along with persistent worry about having more or changes in behavior to avoid them. The fear of the next attack becomes its own problem.

Paranoia

Also: Paranoid thinking

Paranoia is intense, unfounded distrust or suspicion of others, like a belief that people are watching, plotting, or out to cause harm without real evidence.

Paroxetine (Paxil)

Also: Paxil

Paroxetine is an SSRI antidepressant, sold as Paxil, used for depression and a wide range of anxiety disorders. It's the SSRI most associated with difficult discontinuation.

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.

Peer Review

Also: Refereeing, Peer-reviewed

Peer review is the process where independent experts evaluate a study before it's published. It's a quality check that catches many problems, but it doesn't guarantee a study is correct.

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.

Persistent depressive disorder

Also: Dysthymia, Chronic depression

Persistent depressive disorder is a chronic form of depression in which low mood lasts most of the day, more days than not, for at least two years. The symptoms tend to be lower in intensity than major depression but longer lasting.

Physical dependence

Also: dependence, physiological dependence

Physical dependence is when the body has adapted to a medication so that stopping it suddenly causes withdrawal symptoms. It can happen with medication taken exactly as prescribed, and it isn't the same as addiction.

Placebo

Also: Sugar pill, Dummy treatment

A placebo is an inactive treatment, like a sugar pill, used as a comparison in research. Comparing a real treatment against a placebo helps show whether the treatment itself is what's working.

Polypharmacy

Also: Multiple medications

Polypharmacy means taking several medications at the same time. In mental health it usually refers to using more than one psychiatric drug together, which can help but also needs careful oversight.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Also: 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.

Postpartum depression

Also: Perinatal depression, Postnatal depression

Postpartum depression is a form of depression that can occur during pregnancy or in the weeks and months after giving birth. It is more intense and longer lasting than the brief mood dip often called the baby blues.

Prefrontal Cortex

Also: PFC

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.

Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder

Also: PMDD

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.

Pressured speech

Also: Pressure of speech

Pressured speech is rapid, hard-to-interrupt talking that seems driven by an inner urgency. It's a classic feature of mania and hypomania, and it can also appear with severe anxiety or agitation.

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.

Prolonged Grief Disorder

Also: PGD

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.

Propranolol (Inderal)

Also: Inderal

Propranolol is a beta blocker, a heart medication used off-label for the physical symptoms of situational anxiety, like a pounding heart and shaking hands before a performance.

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.

Psychodynamic Therapy

Also: Psychodynamic psychotherapy, Insight-oriented therapy

Psychodynamic therapy is an insight-oriented talk therapy. It explores how past relationships and out-of-awareness feelings shape current patterns, with the goal of understanding yourself more deeply.

Psychoeducation

Also: Patient education

Psychoeducation is teaching people and their families about a mental health condition and its treatment. It's a standard part of care that helps people understand what they're dealing with and how to manage it.

Psychomotor agitation

Also: Psychomotor restlessness

Psychomotor agitation is restless physical movement driven by inner tension, like pacing, fidgeting, or hand-wringing. It shows up in depression, mania, anxiety, and other states of heightened distress.

Psychomotor retardation

Also: psychomotor slowing

Psychomotor retardation is a visible slowing of movement, speech, and thinking. It's a recognized symptom of depression and some other conditions.

Psychotropic

Also: psychotropic medication, psychiatric medication

Psychotropic is the umbrella word for any medication that acts on the brain to affect mood, thinking, or behavior. It's a category, not a specific drug.

Q

Quetiapine (Seroquel)

Also: Seroquel

Quetiapine is an atypical antipsychotic, sold as Seroquel, used for bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and as an add-on for depression. At low doses it's often prescribed off-label for sleep.

R

Racing thoughts

Also: racing mind

Racing thoughts are fast, hard-to-stop streams of ideas that jump from one topic to the next. They're a common symptom in anxiety, mania, and high-stress states.

Radical acceptance

Also: Acceptance skill

Radical acceptance is a DBT skill for fully accepting reality as it is, including painful situations you can't change, so you stop adding suffering to pain. Accepting isn't approving.

Ramelteon (Rozerem)

Also: Rozerem

Ramelteon is a sleep medication, sold as Rozerem, that works on the body clock rather than sedating the brain. It isn't habit-forming and isn't a controlled substance.

Randomized Controlled Trial

Also: RCT, Randomized clinical 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.

Reinforcement

Also: Operant reinforcement

Reinforcement is any consequence that makes a behavior more likely to happen again. It is one of the core ideas behind how learning works and a building block of behavioral therapy.

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria

Also: RSD

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.

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.

Resilience

Also: psychological resilience

Resilience is the ability to adapt and recover after stress, hardship, or trauma. It's bouncing back, not never falling down.

Reuptake

Reuptake is the process where the brain reabsorbs a neurotransmitter after it has done its job. Many antidepressants work by slowing this process down.

Rumination

Rumination is repeated, looping thinking about the same concern, memory, or fear without reaching resolution. It feels like problem-solving but doesn't produce solutions.

S

Schema Therapy

Also: Schema-focused therapy

Schema therapy is a longer-term approach that targets deep, self-defeating life patterns formed early in life. It blends cognitive, emotional, and relationship-based techniques to change those patterns.

Schizoaffective disorder

Also: Schizoaffective psychosis

Schizoaffective disorder is a condition that combines features of schizophrenia, such as hallucinations or delusions, with major mood episodes of depression or mania. It sits between two diagnoses and shares features of both.

Schizoid Personality Disorder

Schizoid personality disorder is a lasting pattern of detachment from relationships and limited emotional expression, where someone genuinely prefers being alone. It's a DSM-5-TR diagnosis.

Schizophrenia

Also: Schizophrenia spectrum disorder

Schizophrenia is a serious mental health condition that affects how a person thinks, perceives reality, and functions. It can involve hallucinations, delusions, and changes in motivation and emotion, and it responds best to early, ongoing treatment.

Schizotypal Personality Disorder

Schizotypal personality disorder is a lasting pattern of social discomfort, odd beliefs or perceptions, and eccentric behavior. It's a DSM-5-TR diagnosis in the schizophrenia spectrum group.

Seasonal affective disorder

Also: Seasonal depression, Winter depression, SAD

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.

Secure attachment

Also: secure attachment style

Secure attachment is a relationship style where closeness and independence feel comfortable. It's an attachment pattern from attachment theory, not a diagnosis.

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-Efficacy

Also: belief in one's own ability

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their own ability to handle a situation or reach a goal. It shapes how much effort people put in and how they respond to setbacks.

Self-Esteem

Also: self-worth

Self-esteem is your overall sense of your own worth, how much you value and respect yourself.

Self-Harm

Also: Self-injury, Non-suicidal self-injury

Self-harm is deliberately hurting your own body as a way to cope with overwhelming emotional pain or distress. If you're struggling, support is available right now.

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.

Sensory overload

Also: Sensory overwhelm

Sensory overload is when input from the senses overwhelms the brain's ability to process it, leading to distress, shutdown, or the need to escape. It's common in autism, ADHD, anxiety, and PTSD.

Separation anxiety disorder

Also: SAD

Separation anxiety disorder is intense, ongoing fear about being apart from the people a person is most attached to. It goes beyond what fits the person's age and can interfere with daily life.

Serotonin

Also: 5-HT

Serotonin is a chemical messenger in the brain and body involved in mood, sleep, appetite, and digestion. It's often called the happiness chemical, but its real role is far more complex.

Serotonin Syndrome

Also: Serotonin toxicity

Serotonin syndrome is a potentially serious reaction caused by too much serotonin activity in the body, often from combining certain medications. It can range from mild to life-threatening and needs prompt medical attention.

Sertraline (Zoloft)

Also: Zoloft

Sertraline is an SSRI antidepressant, sold as Zoloft. It's one of the most widely prescribed psychiatric medications, used for depression, anxiety, panic, OCD, PTSD, and PMDD.

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.

SNRI

Also: 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.

Social anxiety disorder

Also: Social phobia

Social anxiety disorder is an intense, persistent fear of being judged, embarrassed, or scrutinized in social or performance situations. It's more than shyness, and the fear is strong enough to disrupt everyday life.

Social withdrawal

Also: social isolation, withdrawing socially

Social withdrawal is pulling back from contact with other people. It's a common symptom across depression, anxiety, and several other conditions.

Somatic symptom disorder

Also: SSD

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.

Specific phobia

Also: Simple phobia

A specific phobia is an intense, persistent fear of a particular object or situation that is out of proportion to the actual danger. People often go to great lengths to avoid the thing they fear.

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.

SSRI

Also: 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.

Statistical Significance

Also: significant result

Statistical significance means a result is unlikely to be due to chance alone. It does not tell you whether the result is large or important.

Stimulant

Also: ADHD stimulant medication

A stimulant is a medication that's a first-line treatment for ADHD. It helps with focus and impulse control and is a controlled substance managed closely by a prescriber.

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.

Substance use disorder

Also: Addiction, SUD

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.

Suicidal Ideation

Also: Suicidal thoughts, Thoughts of suicide

Suicidal ideation means having thoughts about death or about ending your own life, ranging from passive wishes to active planning. These thoughts are more common than most people realize, they are treatable, and they are a reason to reach out for support.

Supportive Therapy

Also: Supportive psychotherapy

Supportive therapy is a practical, encouraging form of talk therapy that helps a person cope with stress and stay steady. It focuses on strengthening what already works rather than digging into the past.

Suvorexant (Belsomra)

Also: Belsomra

Suvorexant is a newer sleep medication, sold as Belsomra, that works by blocking the brain's wakefulness signal rather than sedating you. It's used for both falling and staying asleep.

Sympathetic Nervous System

Also: SNS

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.

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.

Systematic Review

Also: Evidence synthesis

A systematic review is a structured summary that gathers and appraises all the studies on a specific question. It sits near the top of the evidence hierarchy.

T

Taper

Also: tapering, weaning off

A taper is a planned, gradual reduction of a medication's dose, in steps, instead of stopping all at once. It gives the body time to adjust.

Tardive Dyskinesia

Also: TD

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.

Temazepam (Restoril)

Also: Restoril

Temazepam is a benzodiazepine, sold as Restoril, used for the short-term treatment of insomnia. It carries the dependence and withdrawal risks of its class.

Theory of Mind

Also: mentalizing, perspective-taking

Theory of mind is the ability to understand that other people have their own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that differ from your own.

Therapeutic Alliance

Also: Working alliance, Therapeutic relationship

The therapeutic alliance is the trusting, collaborative bond between a person and their therapist. It's one of the strongest predictors of whether therapy helps.

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.

Tolerance

Also: drug tolerance

Tolerance is when the body adapts to a medication so that the same dose does less than it used to. It's a physical adjustment, not a character flaw.

Tourette syndrome

Also: Tourette disorder, TS

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.

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.

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.

Transference

Also: transference reaction

Transference is when a person in therapy unconsciously redirects feelings, expectations, or patterns from an important past relationship onto their therapist. It's a normal part of treatment that can become useful material to explore.

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.

Trazodone (Desyrel)

Also: Desyrel

Trazodone is an older antidepressant now used most often at low doses as a sleep aid. It isn't habit-forming, which is why it's a common alternative to sleeping pills.

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.

Trichotillomania

Also: Hair-pulling disorder

Trichotillomania is a condition where a person repeatedly pulls out their own hair, leading to noticeable hair loss. The pulling can feel hard to resist and is often followed by relief, then distress.

Tricyclic Antidepressant

Also: TCA, TCAs

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.

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.

V

Vagus Nerve

Also: tenth cranial nerve

The vagus nerve is a long nerve that links the brain to many organs, including the heart and gut. It's a key part of the body's calming, rest-and-digest system.

Validation

Validation is the act of recognizing and accepting another person's feelings or experience as real and understandable. It's a communication and therapy skill, not a diagnosis.

Venlafaxine (Effexor)

Also: Effexor, Effexor XR

Venlafaxine is an SNRI antidepressant, sold as Effexor XR, used for depression and several anxiety disorders. Missing doses tends to be noticeable, which makes taking it consistently matter.

Vortioxetine (Trintellix)

Also: Trintellix

Vortioxetine is a newer antidepressant, sold as Trintellix, used for depression. It has a lower rate of sexual side effects than many SSRIs, and it's expensive because it has no generic.

W

Washout period

Also: washout

A washout period is a deliberate gap between stopping one medication and starting another, so the first one has time to clear the body before the second arrives.

Window of Tolerance

The window of tolerance is the zone of arousal where you can handle stress and stay present without getting overwhelmed or shut down. It's a clinical concept used in trauma and regulation work, not a diagnosis.

Withdrawal

Also: withdrawal symptoms

Withdrawal is the set of symptoms that show up when a substance the body has adapted to is reduced or stopped. With some substances it's uncomfortable, and with a few it's dangerous.

Working Memory

Also: Short-term working memory

Working memory is the brain's ability to hold a small amount of information in mind and use it for a short time. It's a core part of executive function and supports everyday tasks like following directions or doing mental math.

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.

Worthlessness

Also: feeling worthless

Worthlessness is the feeling of having little or no value as a person. It's a common symptom of depression and one that deserves to be taken seriously.

Z

Z-drug

Also: nonbenzodiazepine hypnotic, Z-drugs

Z-drugs are a group of sleep medications, including zolpidem, eszopiclone, and zaleplon, that act on the same brain receptor as benzodiazepines but target sedation more selectively.

Zaleplon (Sonata)

Also: Sonata

Zaleplon is the shortest-acting Z-drug, sold as Sonata. It's used for trouble falling asleep, and it clears fast enough to leave little next-day hangover.

Zolpidem (Ambien)

Also: Ambien

Zolpidem is the most widely prescribed Z-drug, sold as Ambien. It's a fast-acting sleep medication used mainly for trouble falling asleep, and it's meant for short-term use.

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