

# Psychopathology in the Classroom: A Primer for Professors

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The majority of psychological disorders are relatively rare. Nonetheless, there are certain disorders that either tend to be more prevalent in the college classroom, or that are uncommon but nonetheless of special concern relative to academic success in higher education.

Psychological disorders are diagnosed via the professional identification of cognitive, emotional, and physical symptoms. However, almost all symptoms are merely extremes of otherwise normal human behavior. For example, everyone experiences sadness on occasion. Individuals with clinical depression, however, may sometimes feel so sad that they cannot get out of bed for weeks at a time. What follows is a brief introduction to some relevant psychological disorders.

## II. THE DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS

**Learning Disorders.** The group of developmental disorders most likely to be observed in the collegiate classroom are the learning disorders. These disorders are diagnosed as ones of mathematics, reading, or written expression. Individuals with learning disorders tend to manifest difficulties in one of the aforementioned areas, and hence can be expected to experience potentially significant difficulties across numerous courses. It is not uncommon that individuals with learning disorders can appear somewhat immature relative to their peers. However, it is important to stress that such a difference in social behavior tends to be minor and will often go unnoticed by the professor, especially in a large class. The learning disorders are lifelong disorders. The difficulties inherent to these disorders are quite literally written into the wiring of the brain. However, many individuals with learning disorders learn to adequately compensate for their symptoms.

**ADHD.** The attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders comprise a group of three relatively distinct disorders. Moreover, current diagnostic nomenclature tends to contribute to, instead of minimize, confusion around these disorders. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, predominantly hyperactive-impulsive type (the old “ADHD”) is eponymously characterized by symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsivity. The former symptom involves a relative inability to sit still, whereas the latter can be observed as a tendency toward rash decision-making. Thus, individuals with ADHD do not possess a difficulty in attention, per se, but a difficulty remaining still long enough to pay attention.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, predominantly inattentive type (the old “ADD”) is a diagnostic oxymoron. Individuals with this disorder are affected by a neurologic deficit in

attention; they struggle to remain cognitively on a point for any duration. There is nothing hyperactive or impulsive about their behavior. Instead, their relative inability to focus during lectures and assignments can appear as disinterest and ennui.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, combined type is the most problematic from an educational standpoint. Individuals with this disorder manifest hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention.

It is important to note that, to variable degrees, all three types of “ADHD” can be successfully treated with pharmaceuticals. Many students learn to cope quite adequately with their attentional difficulties when aware of their symptoms, adequately medicated, and actively involved in their learning.

**Autism.** It would be quite rare for an individual with autistic disorder to matriculate to college. Autism is characterized by three major symptoms: (a) significantly compromised communication skills (i.e., language), (b) significantly compromised social skills, and (c) mental retardation. However, since approximately 25 percent of individuals with autism are not mentally retarded, and this subset does demonstrate the ability to learn language, there does exist the slim possibility of their presence in a college classroom.

**Asperger’s Disorder.** It is important to differentiate Asperger’s disorder from autism. Asperger’s disorder is primarily characterized by significantly compromised social skills, but in the presence of otherwise intact language and generally above-average intelligence. Such individuals resultantly tend to demonstrate highly immature behaviors relatively to their peers. However, individuals with Asperger’s disorder can be quite successful in the academic arena of college.

## II. THE EMOTIONAL DISORDERS

**Depression.** Taken as a whole, the group of disorders known as the “mood disorders” comprises the most common psychological problem among the general population. Estimates suggest that approximately 25 percent of females, and 20 percent of males, experience a clinical depression at some point in their lives. We can probably assume the same to be true among students in higher education. Depression tends to manifest as some combination of sadness, anhedonia (loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities), lethargy, and irritability. This last symptom is especially prevalent among clinically depressed adolescents. Although some individuals who are clinically depressed attempt suicide, the reality is that such behavior is not the norm. Perhaps most important relative to the classroom is that depression tends to disrupt the cognitive process. Depressed thinking is often characterized by black-and-white thinking, a lack of creativity, and compromised memory.

**Anxiety.** The anxiety disorders are second in prevalence only to the mood disorders. Clinical levels of anxiety can manifest in numerous forms. Most typical is a general and pervasively anxious outlook on life that can potentially interfere with learning and memory. The latter symptom can be especially problematic for individuals during examinations.

Given the number of combat veterans projected to return over the next few years from active war zones overseas to the proverbial shores of American colleges, it may be prudent to prepare for an increasing prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder on campuses. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is characterized by pervasive apprehension across situations, and its symptoms can be expected to interfere with optimal learning.

## **THE PERSONALITY DISORDERS**

**Borderline Personality Disorder.** Although personality disorders are very rare, representing in total only 1 or 2 percent of the general population, some of them have nonetheless received disproportionate and typically inaccurate representation in popular culture. Most notable is the apparent confusion between bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder. The former disorder is a mood disorder characterized by periods of severe depression interspersed with times of exceedingly hyperactive behavior. Alternatively, borderline personality disorder is characterized by emotional instability, a very fragile self-concept, and a relative inability to maintain interpersonal relationships. These two disorders are in no way similar, and behaviorally appear nothing alike. However, it would not be unexpected for some individuals with borderline personality disorder to be excessively personally verbal in the classroom.

## **SUMMARY**

It is important to understand that psychological disorders are very real. Individuals in college who manifest psychological disorders must cope, not only with the normal academic and social challenges of higher education, but additionally with the symptoms characteristic of their disorders. Many of these symptoms can directly or indirectly interfere with learning. As with every other aspect of the role, it is incumbent upon the professor to act with awareness and sensitivity.