

Mental Health Terms: Pocket Reference

The most-looked-up mental health and psychiatry terms, each in one quick line. Keep it, print it, share it.

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Please read

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ADHD

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.

Amygdala

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.

Antidepressant

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

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.

Anxiety

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.

Attachment

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.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

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.

Benzodiazepine

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.

Bipolar disorder

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.

Borderline personality disorder

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

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

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.

Comorbidity

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

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.

Cortisol

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.

Depersonalization

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.

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

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.

Dissociation

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

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.

Dopamine

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

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.

Fight-or-Flight

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.

Gaslighting

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)

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.

Hyperarousal

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.

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

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.

Imposter Syndrome

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.

Intrusive Thought

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.

Major depressive disorder (MDD)

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

Mania

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

Narcissistic personality disorder

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

Neuroplasticity

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.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

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

OCPD (obsessive-compulsive 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.

Overthinking

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.

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

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.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

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

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.

Schizophrenia

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.

Serotonin

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.

SNRI

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

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.

SSRI

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.

Sympathetic Nervous System

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

Trauma bonding

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.

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