

# Words People Mix Up

Plain-English answers to the mental health terms that get confused, one clear distinction at a time.

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**Please read**

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## Panic attack vs anxiety attack

A panic attack is a defined clinical event: a sudden surge of intense fear that peaks within minutes. Anxiety attack isn't a clinical term at all. People use it for the slower, building wave of anxiety that can last much longer.

## Anxiety vs stress

Stress is the response to a real, present demand, and it eases when the demand passes. Anxiety can show up without a current trigger and stick around after the stressor is gone.

## Sadness vs depression

Sadness is a normal emotion that's tied to a cause and lifts with time. Depression is a persistent medical condition: low mood and loss of interest most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two weeks, with real effects on function.

## Worry vs rumination

Worry looks forward and asks 'what if?' about things that might happen. Rumination looks back and asks 'why?' about things that already did. Both are repetitive loops, but they point in opposite directions.

## Burnout vs depression

Burnout is work-related exhaustion that tends to ease when you get distance from the job. Depression is a medical condition that reaches across all of life and doesn't lift just because you take time off.

## Bipolar disorder vs depression

Depression (unipolar) means the mood only goes down. Bipolar disorder means the mood also goes up, into mania or hypomania. The depressed phases can look identical, which is why bipolar disorder is often missed at first.

## ADHD vs anxiety

Both make it hard to concentrate, but for different reasons. In ADHD, attention itself works differently and the pattern is lifelong. In anxiety, worry crowds out focus. They also frequently occur together.

## Intrusive thoughts vs compulsions

An intrusive thought is an unwanted thought, image, or urge that pops into your mind. A compulsion is something you do, a behavior or mental act, to relieve the distress that thought creates. In OCD, the first drives the second.

## CBT vs DBT

CBT is a broad therapy focused on changing unhelpful thoughts and behaviors. DBT is a specialized form of CBT built for intense emotions, adding skills for distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and acceptance.

## Psychiatrist vs psychologist vs therapist

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who can prescribe medication. A psychologist holds a doctorate and provides therapy and testing. Therapist is a broader term for licensed master's-level professionals who provide talk therapy. Most psychologists and therapists don't prescribe.

## Anxiety vs depression

Anxiety is the mind and body bracing for a threat, often with worry, restlessness, and a racing heart. Depression is a lasting low mood with loss of interest and energy. They feel different, but they overlap so often that many people have both at once.

## ADHD vs Autism

ADHD is mainly about attention, impulse control, and restlessness. Autism is mainly about social communication and a strong need for sameness and routine. They look similar in places and often occur together, but they're separate conditions.

## ADD vs ADHD

ADD is an older, informal name for what's now called ADHD. Today everything falls under ADHD, and what people once called ADD is simply the inattentive presentation of ADHD, where attention problems stand out more than hyperactivity.

## Bipolar disorder vs Borderline personality disorder

Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder with distinct episodes of mania or depression that last days to weeks. Borderline personality disorder is a pattern of fast, reactive mood shifts tied to relationships, often changing within hours. The timing and triggers are the main giveaways.

## OCD vs OCPD

OCD is an anxiety-related disorder built around unwanted intrusive thoughts and the repetitive behaviors used to relieve them. OCPD is a personality disorder marked by a rigid, lifelong pursuit of order, control, and perfection. They share three letters but describe very different experiences.

## PTSD vs Complex PTSD

PTSD develops after a traumatic event and centers on re-experiencing, avoidance, and being on edge. Complex PTSD usually follows prolonged or repeated trauma and adds lasting difficulties with emotions, self-worth, and relationships. Complex PTSD includes the features of PTSD and then goes further.

## Panic attack vs heart attack

A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense fear with strong physical symptoms that peak within minutes and aren't dangerous. A heart attack is a medical emergency caused by blocked blood flow to the heart. The symptoms can overlap closely, and you can't reliably tell them apart on your own, so any chest pain or doubt should be treated as an emergency.

## Mania vs hypomania

Mania and hypomania are the same kind of elevated, energized mood state, but mania is more severe. Mania lasts longer, causes serious problems in daily life, and can include psychosis or require hospitalization. Hypomania is a milder, shorter version that doesn't reach that level of impairment.

## Grief vs Depression

Ordinary grief is a normal response to loss, not a disorder. Clinical depression is a diagnosable condition that can persist regardless of circumstances. They can look alike at first, and grief can sometimes tip into prolonged grief disorder or occur alongside depression.

## Schizophrenia vs Dissociative identity disorder

These are two distinct conditions that pop culture constantly confuses. Schizophrenia is a psychotic disorder involving hallucinations and delusions. Dissociative identity disorder involves two or more distinct identity states and gaps in memory. Schizophrenia does not mean a split or multiple personalities.

## Depersonalization vs Derealization

Both are forms of dissociation that often show up together. Depersonalization is feeling detached from yourself, as if watching your own life from outside. Derealization is feeling that the world around you is unreal, dreamlike, or far away.

## Stress vs anxiety vs worry

Worry is the thinking, anxiety is the body's alarm, and stress is your response to a load that's actually on you. They overlap, but they start in different places, and each one points to a different fix.

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**Learn more: compare these terms in depth at [shrinktionary.com/compare](https://shrinktionary.com/compare)**