

## Insight



**DEPRESSION, PSYCHODYNAMIC THERAPY, PSYCHOPATHOLOGY**

# WHAT CAUSES PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS?

FEBRUARY 22, 2015 | RUNE MOELBAK | 3 COMMENTS



Although there are some psychological disorders that have a clear biological or genetic component, many if not most are responses to life's adversities and quite treatable through therapy.

## What is a Psychological Disorder?

A psychological disorder is often not really an illness such as one would define diabetes or multiple sclerosis. Instead it is simply a name given to a collection of distressing symptoms that frequently go together and thus would appear to refer to the same underlying phenomenon.

*Major Depressive Disorder*, for example, is the name we give to the symptom of persistent low mood or lack of excitement that is accompanied by a minimum of 5 other symptoms such as: hopelessness, low self-esteem, changes in sleep and appetite, low energy, low motivation, decreased concentration, and possibly suicidal thoughts.

Unlike an illness, however, most psychological disorders have no singular defining cause and therefore do not refer to an underlying disease process. What we call psychological disorders are therefore simply descriptions of surface-level similarities in how psychological problems can manifest themselves.

To truly understand why a person is depressed, or what causes the depression, we must move beyond the symptoms to the origin of the symptoms. When we do this we often find that *your* depression and *my* depression are not really the same. They are not defined by the same underlying cause, but are simply like the fever or the cough that can hide over widely divergent underlying issues.

## The Causes of Psychological Disorders:

When we look at the internal functioning of most people, we often find that psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety are the result of ways of protecting ourselves from painful or unpleasant emotions.

Somewhere, at some point, we developed negative emotional responses to our primary emotions and longings: Those healthy and natural feelings that a child expresses spontaneously without guilt or shame.

For example, we may have developed guilt about our sexual desire, shame about needing other people, anxiety about expressing our anger, or unbearable pain associated with the experience of loss or rejection.

These secondary aversive reactions to our primary emotions taint these natural emotions and needs, and lead us to shut them out, inhibit them, or engage in all kinds of self-protective behaviors intended to keep us safe from our own unpleasant experiences.

- To protect ourselves from guilt about sexual feelings, we may for example develop a life strategy of never really dating.
- To avoid feeling shame about our longing for closeness, we may live a life of always helping others and not being able to receive help from others.
- To not feel anxious about our anger, we may become a people pleaser, ignore our own needs, and not be able to assert ourselves.
- To not feel overwhelmed with pain associated with losses, we may bury ourselves in work and live a life of always being on the go and always distracting ourselves.

In each case we may become depressed or anxious as a result of cutting ourselves off from a natural source of vitality and living a life that is at odds with itself or impoverished in some way.

Depression and anxiety are here not referring to a cause. Instead they are the symptoms that have resulted from conflicted experiences and our failed strategies of dealing with these experiences.

## Psychological Disorders as Defenses:

Other psychological disorders can be explained in a similar way...

Intrusive obsessions about one's own destructive impulses (OCD), can in some cases be a way to protect oneself from dealing with guilt about the rightful expression of assertive needs, which one fears would destroy others or be too much to handle.

Social anxiety and the avoidance of social interaction can in some cases find an explanation in the attempt to avoid feeling the shame of rejection, which has been magnified to mean the destruction of one's self-worth.

In this way, most of what we call psychological disorders can be unraveled and explained as symptoms of underlying conflicts that are specific to each person's life experiences.

## Resolving Psychological Disorders:

A psychological disorder usually makes perfect sense once we understand the full picture of the person's psychological reality.

The goal of therapy is therefore to locate within a person's life, the experiences or moments that have led to secondary reactions of guilt, shame, pain, or anxiety to normal, human, healthy emotions, needs, or expectations.

People must unlearn the fear, shame, or guilt that has become associated with being fully themselves. They must be able to fully get in touch with yearnings and feelings that have been considered too dangerous and have therefore been shut out. By thus regaining access to hidden parts of themselves, they can stop being at war with themselves and can become free to respond in more life-affirming ways to life's many challenges.

Simply slapping a label on someone and classifying someone as having a particular disorder, tells us nothing about the journey each person has to go through in order to undo their disordered ways of dealing with life's dilemmas.

**About me:** I am Rune Moelbak, Ph.D., a **psychologist in Houston Texas**. I help people get to the root of their problems so they can experience real change rather than temporary gains.



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