

# Definitions of abnormality

Explore some definitions alongside a real-world example

Anna is 25 and suffers with agoraphobia, a fear of being in situations where escape may be difficult. It is a condition that affects a minority of the population. She finds it very difficult to leave the house, meaning she cannot hold down a job. If she leaves the house she becomes extremely anxious, her heart rate increases and she feels faint. She also feels uncomfortable around others and is scared she will have a panic attack and everyone will think she is stupid.

## Deviation from social norms

Social norms are rules about how people 'ought' to behave. They are established by your social group (i.e. your community or culture), which is why they are called 'social' norms.

When people deviate from social norms (behave in a way that is different to these accepted standards of behaviour) this is often viewed as abnormal.

Anna is deviating from social norms as she is not leaving her house. The social norm would be for a 25-year-old to be able to leave the house without a sense of anxiety.

People would view her behaviour as abnormal for a woman of her age.

## Failure to function adequately

A person may not be able to cope with the demands of everyday life. Examples of 'failing to function adequately' are:

- Dysfunctional behaviour: behaviour which interferes with the ability to lead a normal, everyday life, for example not eating regularly, not being able to maintain a job.
- Personal distress: being intensely unhappy and having no hope for the future.

Anna is not functioning adequately as she is unable to cope with everyday life. This is shown through dysfunctional behaviour as her agoraphobia is preventing her from having a long-term job.

She will also be experiencing personal distress because she is anxious about leaving the house and may be feeling hopeless about the future.

## Statistical infrequency

What is regarded as normal is defined by referring to 'typical' behaviours, i.e. 'normal' behaviour.

Anything statistically rare/uncommon is defined as abnormal.

Anna's behaviour can be seen as statistically rare as only a small proportion of people in a population will suffer from agoraphobia.

Her behaviour is not common.

## Deviation from ideal mental health

This definition considers what makes people mentally *healthy*.

If the criteria of mental health are absent, then a person may be considered as mentally 'unhealthy', i.e. showing abnormal behaviour.

Examples of the criteria for mental health are:

- striving to self-actualise, i.e. maximise your abilities
- accurate perception of reality
- autonomy, i.e. being independent
- good self-esteem
- ability to cope with stress

For Anna, the criteria of autonomy is absent as she is restricted in what she can do.

She also lacks an accurate perception of reality as she worries that other people will think she is stupid.

Furthermore she is not coping well with the stress (anxiety) as her solution is to avoid it.

Therefore she is not meeting the criteria for ideal mental health.

What other links could you make to the stem?

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