



# Doctor Debug™

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## **Debugging Doctor Debug**

Doctor Debug made a boo-boo in his last column. (Must have been my Windows® 98 operating system ... heehee). In the "Shrink vs. Shrink" section of my July 15 column, I reported that Ph.D. and Psy.D. psychologists generally complete three years of graduate education. As Laura Brown, Ph.D, so correctly pointed out, that is *old* history. Since about 1987, most states require clinical psychologists to do five to seven years of post-graduate work, which usually includes 1,500 hours in an internship. I stand debugged!

## **Chiroshrinks?**

Another reader wrote, "I didn't know chiropractors could go on to become psychiatrists. Thanks for

the information!" Yep, Chiroshrinks. I can see the ads now—"Get adjusted while you are getting an adjustment" or "Two adjustments for the price of one!" Something else to know: Chiropractors and osteopaths often receive better training than medical doctors in certain aspects of medicine.

Speaking of adjustments, tune in next month for "Are We Well Yet?", Doctor Debug's update on our post-9/11 traumatic stress condition.

## **Debugging "Disorder"**

Dear Doc,

I was recently diagnosed as having an adjustment disorder, which my therapist described to me as an "adjustment disorder with mixed depression and

anxiety." I have been told that this diagnosis falls within the realm of normal psychology. If this is true, then why is it considered a mental illness? It makes a difference to me whether I am classified as mentally ill, which seems like something very serious, or whether I am just having a difficult time coping with my recent divorce. Thank you.

—Looking for What's Normal

Dear Looking for Normal,

Thank you for this question! This goes into my Top 10 list of favorite questions because it allows me to rant a bit about the medical system. Therefore, please keep in mind that what I say in this column today may not conform to the standard party line of my psychiatric colleagues.

With the word "normal," you simply have to take a stand. It means either "ideal" or "average"; it can't mean both. I use normal to mean only and always "average." No confusion.

The short answer to your question about mental illness is that an Adjustment Disorder with Mixed Anxiety and Depressed Mood is officially a disorder found in the current United States classification of mental disorders known as—take a deep breath—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th Edition (a.k.a. the DSM).

Hmmm ... This may not be very reassuring to you. Hang in

there. I am going to give you a longer answer, which should help you debug the word "disorder."

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) posts the following statement on its Web site: "*Mental illness* refers collectively to all diagnosable mental disorders. Mental disorders are health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood or behavior ... associated with distress and/or impaired functioning." So, according to the NIMH, you are not *only* suffering from a disorder, but you are also experiencing a mental illness, since all disorders are illnesses.

Here is the big question for the NIMH: If a mental disorder is a health "condition," why not just leave it at that? Why go down the rocky road of "disorder"? For most people, the word "disorder" amps the stigma and fear factor way up.

Unfortunately, illness has been defined as a "disease of body or mind." Can you really have a disease of the mind? It is a fundamental flaw of the dictionary to define illness as a disease of the mind. The mind is not a physical entity, so how can it have a disease? Look up "disease": "a pathological condition in an organism resulting from infection or genetic defect."

"Mind" refers to consciousness. Thoughts,

reactions, perceptions and programming of the mind can lead to destructive behavioral problems and flawed thinking, but these are hardly diseases. They are conditions.

Give psychiatrists a chance to make something more complex than it has to be, and they can do a pretty good job of it. In my humble opinion, the DSM should be called "The Official List of Mental and Emotional Conditions." Some of those conditions will be illnesses or disorders; many of them will not. A good dose of skepticism is appropriate when the seriousness of a condition's name can potentially yield a higher payment from a health insurance provider.

Psychology types have discussed the question of what

word to use when referring to something not so average—"difficulty"? "problem"? "condition"? "disorder"? "illness"?—for many years. Most psychiatrists stand by the DSM disorder language. This does not mean that *you* have to. To a certain extent, we can each decide what word we want to use to describe *our* situation.

### ***Your Bug Equation***

You have been diagnosed with a disorder. The word "disorder" comes from a scientific manual which uses that word in such a way that it can make a condition sound more serious than it is. Your condition is average, and thus, normal. There are very few people who have not met the criteria for adjustment disorder at some point in their

lives. "Condition" is a better word for what you are experiencing than "disorder."

The good news is that most adjustment conditions last only about six months. You are working on your concerns, so you are well on your way to finding solutions and relief. Even people with average conditions can benefit from good therapy.

However, for the sake of our society, we either need to get better at *not* taking the word "disorder" so seriously, or we need to change some of the words we use for mental and emotional difficulties so they more accurately reflect the wide range of conditions.

—*Doctor Debug*  
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**Feeling bugged?** Write to Doctor Debug, a psychiatrist with 27 years of counseling experience. Ask him about mental wellness, or send questions regarding personal, social, relationship, medication or sexual concerns.

E-mail sent to Doctor Debug is read only by Ron Sterling, M.D. No identities, whatsoever, will be revealed in any published answers.

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