

Glossary of Signs and Symptoms

abstract thinking

Thinking characterized by the ability to grasp the essentials of a whole, to break a whole into its parts, and to discern common properties. To think symbolically.

abulia

Reduced impulse to act and to think, associated with indifference about consequences of action. Occurs as a result of neurological deficit, depression, and schizophrenia.

affect

The subjective and immediate experience of emotion attached to ideas or mental representations of objects. Affect has outward manifestations that can be classified as restricted, blunted, flattened, broad, labile, appropriate, or inappropriate. See also mood.

agitation

Severe anxiety associated with motor restlessness.

agoraphobia

Morbid fear of open places or leaving the familiar setting of the home. May be present with or without panic attacks.

akathisia

Subjective feeling of motor restlessness manifested by a compelling need to be in constant movement; may be seen as an extrapyramidal adverse effect of antipsychotic medication. May be mistaken for psychotic agitation.

alexithymia

Inability or difficulty in describing or being aware of one's emotions or moods; elaboration of fantasies associated with depression, substance abuse, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

ambivalence

Coexistence of two opposing impulses toward the same thing in the same person at the same time. Seen in schizophrenia, borderline states, and obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCDs).

anhedonia

Loss of interest in, and withdrawal from, all regular and pleasurable activities. Often associated with depression.

anosognosia

Inability to recognize a physical deficit in oneself (e.g., patient denies paralyzed limb).

anterograde amnesia

Loss of memory for events subsequent to the onset of the amnesia; common after trauma. Compare with retrograde amnesia.

bizarre delusion

False belief that is patently absurd or fantastic (e.g., invaders from space have implanted electrodes in a person's brain). Common in schizophrenia. In nonbizarre delusion, content is usually within the range of possibility.

catalepsy

Condition in which persons maintain the body position into which they are placed; observed in severe cases of catatonic schizophrenia. Also called waxy flexibility and cerea flexibilitas. See also command automatism.

cataplexy

Temporary sudden loss of muscle tone, causing weakness and immobilization; can be precipitated by a variety of emotional states and is often followed by sleep. Commonly seen in narcolepsy.

catatonic excitement

Excited, uncontrolled motor activity seen in catatonic schizophrenia. Patients in catatonic state may suddenly erupt into an excited state and may be violent.

catatonic stupor

Stupor in which patients ordinarily are well aware of their surroundings.

cenesthesia

Change in the normal quality of feeling tone in a part of the body.

cerea flexibilitas

Condition of a person who can be molded into a position that is then maintained; when an examiner moves the person's limb, the limb feels as if it were made of wax. Also called catalepsy or waxy flexibility. Seen in schizophrenia.

circumstantiality

Disturbance in the associative thought and speech processes in which a patient digresses into unnecessary details and inappropriate thoughts before communicating the central idea. Observed in schizophrenia, obsessional disturbances, and certain cases of dementia. See also tangentiality.

cognition

Mental process of knowing and becoming aware; function is closely associated with judgment.

compulsion

Pathological need to act on an impulse that, if resisted, produces anxiety; repetitive behavior in response to an obsession or performed according to certain rules, with no true end in itself other than to prevent something from occurring in the future.

concrete thinking

Thinking characterized by actual things, events, and immediate experience, rather than by abstractions; seen in young children, in those who have lost or never developed the ability to generalize (as in certain cognitive mental disorders), and in schizophrenic persons. Compare with abstract thinking.

confabulation

Unconscious filling of gaps in memory by imagining experiences or events that have no basis in fact, commonly seen in amnesic syndromes; should be differentiated from lying. See also paramnesia.

constricted affect

Reduction in intensity of feeling tone that is less severe than that of blunted affect.

conversion phenomena

The development of symbolic physical symptoms and distortions involving the voluntary muscles or special sense organs; not under voluntary control and not explained by any physical disorder. Most common in conversion disorder, but also seen in a variety of mental disorders.

coprolalia

Involuntary use of vulgar or obscene language. Observed in some cases of schizophrenia and in Tourette's syndrome.

decompensation

Deterioration of psychic functioning caused by a breakdown of defense mechanisms. Seen in psychotic states.

delirium

Acute reversible mental disorder characterized by confusion and some impairment of consciousness; generally associated with emotional lability, hallucinations or illusions, and inappropriate, impulsive, irrational, or violent behavior.

delirium tremens

Acute and sometimes fatal reaction to withdrawal from alcohol, usually occurring 72 to 96 hours after the cessation of heavy drinking; distinctive characteristics are marked autonomic hyperactivity (tachycardia, fever, hyperhidrosis, and dilated pupils), usually accompanied by tremulousness, hallucinations, illusions, and delusions. Called alcohol withdrawal delirium in DSM-IV-TR. See also formication.

delusion

False belief, based on incorrect inference about external reality, that is firmly held despite objective and obvious contradictory proof or evidence and despite the fact that other members of the culture do not share the belief.

delusion of control

False belief that a person's will, thoughts, or feelings are being controlled by external forces.

delusion of grandeur

Exaggerated conception of one's importance, power, or identity.

delusion of infidelity

False belief that one's lover is unfaithful. Sometimes called pathological jealousy.

delusion of persecution

False belief of being harassed or persecuted; often found in litigious patients who have a pathological tendency to take legal action because of imagined mistreatment. Most common delusion.

delusion of poverty

False belief that one is bereft or will be deprived of all material possessions.

delusion of reference

False belief that the behavior of others refers to oneself or that events, objects, or other people have a particular and unusual significance, usually of a negative nature; derived from idea of reference, in which persons falsely feel that others are talking about them (e.g., belief that people on television or radio are talking to or about the person). See also thought broadcasting.

depersonalization

Sensation of unreality concerning oneself, parts of oneself, or one's environment that occurs under extreme stress or fatigue. Seen in schizophrenia, depersonalization disorder, and schizotypal personality disorder.

derealization

Sensation of changed reality or that one's surroundings have altered. Usually seen in schizophrenia, panic attacks, and dissociative disorders.

dereism

Mental activity that follows a totally subjective and idiosyncratic system of logic and fails to take the facts of reality or experience into consideration. Characteristic of schizophrenia. See also autistic thinking.

disorientation

Confusion; impairment of awareness of time, place, and person (the position of the self in relation to other persons). Characteristic of cognitive disorders.

dissociation

Unconscious defense mechanism involving the segregation of any group of mental or behavioral processes from the rest of the person's psychic activity; may entail the separation of an idea from its accompanying emotional tone, as seen in dissociative and conversion disorders. Seen in dissociative disorders.

distractibility

Inability to focus one's attention; the patient does not respond to the task at hand but attends to irrelevant phenomena in the environment.

dysphoria

Feeling of unpleasantness or discomfort; a mood of general dissatisfaction and restlessness. Occurs in depression and anxiety.

echolalia

Psychopathological repeating of words or phrases of one person by another; tends to be repetitive and persistent. Seen in certain kinds of schizophrenia, particularly the catatonic types.

ego-alien

Denoting aspects of a person's personality that are viewed as repugnant, unacceptable, or inconsistent with the rest of the personality. Also called ego-dystonia. Compare with ego-syntonic.

ego-syntonic

Denoting aspects of a personality that are viewed as acceptable and consistent with that person's total personality. Personality traits are usually ego-syntonic. Compare with ego-alien.

eidetic image

Unusually vivid or exact mental image of objects previously seen or imagined.

emotional lability

Excessive emotional responsiveness characterized by unstable and rapidly changing emotions.

erotomania

Delusional belief, more common in women than in men, that someone is deeply in love with them (also known as de ClÃ©rambault syndrome).

euthymia

Normal range of mood, implying absence of depressed or elevated mood.

expansive mood

Expression of feelings without restraint, frequently with an overestimation of their significance or importance. Seen in mania and grandiose delusional disorder.

flat affect

Absence or near absence of any signs of affective expression.

flight of ideas

Rapid succession of fragmentary thoughts or speech in which content changes abruptly and speech may be incoherent. Seen in mania.

folie à deux

Mental illness shared by two persons, usually involving a common delusional system; if it involves three persons, it is referred to as folie à trois, and so on. Also called shared psychotic disorder.

formal thought disorder

Disturbance in the form rather than the content of thought; thinking characterized by loosened associations, neologisms, and illogical constructs; thought process is disordered, and the person is defined as psychotic. Characteristic of schizophrenia.

formication

Tactile hallucination involving the sensation that tiny insects are crawling over the skin. Seen in cocaine addiction and delirium tremens.

free-floating anxiety

Severe, pervasive, generalized anxiety that is not attached to any particular idea, object, or event. Observed particularly in anxiety disorders, although it may be seen in some cases of schizophrenia.

fugue

Dissociative disorder characterized by a period of almost complete amnesia, during which a person actually flees from an immediate life situation and begins a different life pattern; apart from the amnesia, mental faculties and skills are usually unimpaired.

grandiosity

Exaggerated feelings of one's importance, power, knowledge, or identity. Occurs in delusional disorder and manic states.

hallucination

False sensory perception occurring in the absence of any relevant external stimulation of the sensory modality involved. For types of hallucinations, see the specific term.

hypermnnesia

Exaggerated degree of retention and recall. It can be elicited by hypnosis and may be seen in certain prodigies; also can be a feature of OCD, some cases of schizophrenia, and manic episodes of bipolar I disorder.

hypersomnia

Excessive time spent asleep. Can be associated with underlying medical or psychiatric disorder or narcolepsy, can be part of the Kleine-Levin syndrome, or may be primary.

hypervigilance

Excessive attention to, and focus on, all internal and external stimuli; usually seen in delusional or paranoid states.

hypnagogic hallucination

Hallucination occurring while falling asleep, not ordinarily considered pathological.

hypnopompic hallucination

Hallucination occurring while awakening from sleep, not ordinarily considered pathological.

illusion

Perceptual misinterpretation of a real external stimulus. Compare with hallucination.

impaired insight

Diminished ability to understand the objective reality of a situation.

impaired judgment

Diminished ability to understand a situation correctly and to act appropriately.

impulse control

Ability to resist an impulse, drive, or temptation to perform some action.

incoherence

Communication that is disconnected, disorganized, or incomprehensible. See also word salad.

initial insomnia

Falling asleep with difficulty; usually seen in anxiety disorder. Compare with middle insomnia and terminal insomnia.

insomnia

Difficulty in falling asleep or difficulty in staying asleep. It can be related to a mental disorder, a physical disorder, or an adverse effect of medication; or it can be primary (not related to a known medical factor or another mental disorder). See also initial insomnia, middle insomnia, and terminal insomnia.

logorrhea

Copious, pressured, coherent speech; uncontrollable, excessive talking; observed in manic episodes of bipolar disorder. Also called tachylogia, verbomania, and volubility.

loosening of associations

Characteristic schizophrenic thinking or speech disturbance involving a disorder in the logical progression of thoughts, manifested as a failure to communicate verbally adequately; unrelated and unconnected ideas shift from one subject to another. See also tangentiality.

magical thinking

A form of dereistic thought; thinking similar to that of the preoperational phase in children (Jean Piaget), in which thoughts, words, or actions assume power (e.g., to cause or to prevent events).

mania

Mood state characterized by elation, agitation, hyperactivity, hypersexuality, and accelerated thinking and speaking (flight of ideas). Seen in bipolar I disorder. See also hypomania.

melancholia

Severe depressive state. Used in the term involuntional melancholia as a descriptive term and also in reference to a distinct diagnostic entity.

middle insomnia

Waking up after falling asleep without difficulty and then having difficulty in falling asleep again. Compare with initial insomnia and terminal insomnia.

negativism

Verbal or nonverbal opposition or resistance to outside suggestions and advice; commonly seen in catatonic schizophrenia in which the patient resists any effort to be moved or does the opposite of what is asked.

neologism

New word or phrase whose derivation cannot be understood; often seen in schizophrenia. It has also been used to mean a word that has been incorrectly constructed but whose origins are nonetheless understandable (e.g., headshoe to mean hat), but such constructions are more properly referred to as word approximations.

nihilism

Delusion of the nonexistence of the self or part of the self; also refers to an attitude of total rejection of established values or extreme skepticism regarding moral and value judgments.

obsession

Persistent and recurrent idea, thought, or impulse that cannot be eliminated from consciousness by logic or reasoning; obsessions are involuntary and ego-dystonic. See also compulsion.

paranoid delusions

Includes persecutory delusions and delusions of reference, control, and grandeur.

perseveration

(1) Pathological repetition of the same response to different stimuli, as in a repetition of the same verbal response to different questions. (2) Persistent repetition of specific words or concepts in the process of speaking. Seen in cognitive disorders, schizophrenia, and other mental illness. See also verbigeration.

phobia

Persistent, pathological, unrealistic, intense fear of an object or situation; the phobic person may realize that the fear is irrational but, nonetheless, cannot dispel it.

poverty of speech

Restriction in the amount of speech used; replies may be monosyllabic. See also laconic speech.

pseudodementia

(1) Dementia-like disorder that can be reversed by appropriate treatment and is not caused by organic brain disease. (2) Condition in which patients show exaggerated indifference to their surroundings in the absence of a mental disorder; also occurs in depression and factitious disorders.

psychomotor agitation

Physical and mental overactivity that is usually nonproductive and is associated with a feeling of inner turmoil, as seen in agitated depression.

reality testing

Fundamental ego function that consists of tentative actions that test and objectively evaluate the nature and limits of the environment; includes the ability to differentiate between the external world and the internal world and to accurately judge the relation between the self and the environment.

regression

Unconscious defense mechanism in which a person undergoes a partial or total return to earlier patterns of adaptation; observed in many psychiatric conditions, particularly schizophrenia.

retrograde amnesia

Loss of memory for events preceding the onset of the amnesia. Compare with anterograde amnesia.

retrospective falsification

Memory becomes unintentionally (unconsciously) distorted by being filtered through a person's present emotional, cognitive, and experiential state.

rumination

Constant preoccupation with thinking about a single idea or theme, as in OCD.

somnolence

Pathological sleepiness or drowsiness from which one can be aroused to a normal state of consciousness.

stereotypy

Continuous mechanical repetition of speech or physical activities; observed in catatonic schizophrenia.

tangentiality

Oblique, digressive, or even irrelevant manner of speech in which the central idea is not communicated.

tension

Physiological or psychic arousal, uneasiness, or pressure toward action; an unpleasurable alteration in mental or physical state that seeks relief through action.

terminal insomnia

Early morning awakening or waking up at least 2 hours before planning to wake up. Compare with initial insomnia and middle insomnia.

thought broadcasting

Feeling that one's thoughts are being broadcast or projected into the environment. See also thought withdrawal.

thought insertion

Delusion that thoughts are being implanted in one's mind by other people or forces.

thought withdrawal

Delusion that one's thoughts are being removed from one's mind by other people or forces. See also thought broadcasting.

tic disorders

Predominantly psychogenic disorders characterized by involuntary, spasmodic, stereotyped movement of small groups of muscles; seen most predominantly in moments of stress or anxiety, rarely as a result of organic disease.