

PSYCHOPATHOLOGY: CHARACTERISTICS

Outline and evaluate characteristics of phobias, depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder

Phobias are an intense, irrational, and persistent fear of an object, situation, or activity. These can be specific or social phobias and most cause much distress and may restrict a person's day to day life. Behavioural characteristics include physically avoiding the stimulus or freezing on the spot and in some cases such as panic causes the person to faint. Emotional characteristics reported by patients include feelings of stress and anxiety. Patients will describe a genuine fear of the stimulus or situation. Cognitive characteristics include irrational thought processes, cognitive distortion and resistance to logical, rational thinking.

Depression is a clinical disorder where patients report feeling low, upset and worthless. It is a mood disorder that involves a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest in activities. Behavioural characteristics are usually easy to observe as patients show a reduced level of motivation and energy. Their sleeping and eating habits may change and they will seem more agitated and restless. Patients might experience a sense of sadness or hopelessness which may result in low self-esteem. Some patients become more aggressive and quicker to anger. When asked to report their cognitive characteristics they will show evidence of negative self-belief and may have recurrent thoughts that are often maladaptive.

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is a mental health condition that causes people to experience unwanted, recurring thoughts which result in compulsive and repetitive behaviours. These compulsions often interfere with day to day activities and can consume an individual's time. As OCD is an anxiety disorder patients will report emotional characteristics such as fear and distress or even embarrassment or disgust. Yet these feelings do not prevent them from acting out the compulsion, in fact they can make it worse. When speaking to patients with OCD they will describe many cognitive characteristics such as irrational thinking and ruminations which are intrusive and dominate their thoughts. They may also be hypervigilant and on high alert, always expecting the worst to happen.

All symptoms and characteristics are experienced differently by each individual, even those with the same clinical diagnosis. However, generalisations of symptoms and characteristics help make the treatment programmes more effective and most patients are motivated to get better. Yet, one problem is that these symptoms and characteristics are self-reported by the patient which is a subjective process. In particular, the cognitive symptoms are hard to measure and the emotional characteristics take time to work through in therapy. Nevertheless, having an understanding of the typical characteristics of clinical disorders helps us recognise changes in people and can contribute to successful treatment programmes. All symptoms are described in the DSM or ICD for clinical diagnosis.

