

The Four Ds of Abnormality

Speaker: Deb Vos

The illusive definition of what is a psychological abnormality has been asked and discussed by many with more multiple perspectives. Numerous definitions have been proposed, yet none has gained complete acceptance. Most definitions have certain features in common. “The four Ds:” is the most common definition. This definition provides a useful starting point, but it has key limitations.

The first D is deviance. Deviance is where an abnormal behavior is viewed as different, extreme, unusual, and perhaps even bizarre. Every society has its own standards or norms for behavior, which arise from that society’s culture—values, institutions, history, etc. Social norms are stated and unstated rules for proper conduct in a given society or culture. Therefore, abnormal behavior is behavior that is different from behaviors, thoughts, and emotions considered normal in a specific place and time and by specific people. Judgments of abnormality vary from society to society as norms grow from a particular culture. They also depend on specific circumstances that influence how we understand the behavior.

The second D is distress. According to a number of clinical theorists, behavior, ideas, or emotions have to cause distress before they can be labeled abnormal, and difference alone is not sufficient for the behavior to be labeled abnormal. A limitation of this criterion is that it is not always the case that the individual finds their thoughts and behaviors unpleasant or upsetting.

The third D is dysfunction. It seems that abnormal behavior tends to be dysfunctional—it interferes with daily functioning, disrupting social relationships and impacting one’s ability to work. It is important to realize that the presence of dysfunction alone does not necessarily indicate a psychological abnormality.

The fourth and last D is danger. Abnormal behavior may become dangerous to oneself or others. Behavior may be careless, hostile, or confused. Although often cited as a feature of psychological abnormality, research suggests that dangerousness is the exception rather than the rule among individuals with psychological disorders.

Abnormal functioning is generally considered to be deviant, distressful, dysfunctional, and dangerous. Behavior must also be considered in the context in which it occurs, however, and the concept of abnormality depends on the norms and values of the society in question.

Kearney, C. & Trull, T. (2018). *Abnormal psychology and life: A dimensional approach*, 3rd ed. Cengage.

Barlow, D., Durand, V. M., & Hofmann, S. (2018). *Abnormal psychology: An integrative approach*, 8th ed. Cengage.