

Some Myths and Misconceptions about Abnormal Behavior

Myth or Misconception	Fact
Abnormal behavior is always bizarre.	<p>The behavior of many people who are diagnosed as having a mental disorder often cannot be distinguished from that of “normal” people.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• In one case, Jim is an unemployed, single man who says that what really bothers him is that he has a special power. He can influence other people with the way he breathes. This would be considered bizarre.• Janet who is depressive, her behavior would not be considered bizarre.
Normal and abnormal behavior are different in kind.	<p>Few, if any, types of behavior displayed by individuals with a mental disorder are unique to them. Abnormal behavior often consists of a poor fit between the behavior and the situation in which it is enacted.</p>
People with a mental disorder are dangerous.	<p>With the exception of a few people, such as those with antisocial personality disorder, most people with a mental disorder are not dangerous.</p>
Once people have a mental disorder, they will never get rid of it.	<p>Most people can be successfully treated for a mental disorder.</p>

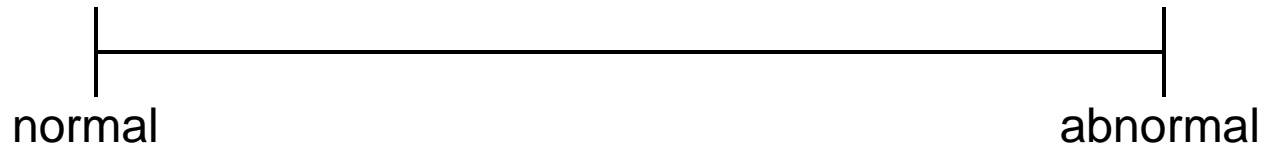
What is abnormal behavior? What is normal behavior?

The common usage of the word abnormal is not the same as how we use the word abnormal in psychology.

Normal and Abnormal Behavior

What is the difference between normal and abnormal?

Human behavior lies on a continuum from “normal” to “abnormal”.



When does normal behavior become abnormal behavior?

Psychologists use the following guidelines when assessing whether behavior is abnormal:

- **D**istressing
- **D**ysfunctional (maladaptive)
- **D**eviant

Distress

When a person experiences considerable emotional distress, they may have a psychological disorder. This can range from being sad and depressed, anxious, agitated or frightened by objects or hallucinations.

- **Do these behaviors cause personal distress?**
- **Are they troubled by these feelings?**

If behavior is distressing to the individual, psychologists may consider the behavior abnormal. However, some people with anti-social personality disorder, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder are not distressed by these feelings, objects or perceptions.

Dysfunctional

Some experts believe that the best way to distinguish between normal and abnormal behavior is to see if the behavior leads to healthy or unhealthy functioning.

Is the behavior dysfunctional for the individual or for society? Is it maladaptive?

- Does it interfere with the person's ability to form satisfying relationships (both personal or professional)?
 - Eg. shouting and yelling at co-workers, family members, etc.
 - Having troubles getting enough sleep
 - Sleeping too much
- Is the person a danger to themselves or others?

Both distressing and dysfunctional behavior can be more disturbing if the person cannot control their reactions or are unaware of the reasons for their distress and dysfunction.

Deviant

Is the behavior a large departure from the norms of their society? Is the behavior considered strange within the person's own culture?

- Is the behavior a serious deviation from the social norms of that culture?
 - What is considered normal within a culture is not necessarily normal in another culture.
 - Likewise, what is abnormal in one is not necessarily abnormal in another.
 - In some cultures it is normal for women to appear in public bare-breasted. It would be abnormal for a female executive in an industrialized culture to go to work that way.



Abnormal behavior is defined by each culture. For example, homelessness is considered abnormal in some cultures and completely normal in others.

Who assesses these criteria?

- psychiatrists
- clinical psychologists

When abnormal behavior becomes extreme, people are judged to have a psychological disorder. The difficulty in assessing a psychological disorder is

- distinguishing between normal behavior and extreme behavior and
- the presence or absence of the symptoms.

What is abnormal?

Abnormal behavior is behavior that is personally distressing, personally dysfunctional, and/or so cultural deviant that other people judge it to be inappropriate or maladaptive

Using the criteria of

- **D**istressing,
- **D**ysfunctional, and
- **D**eviant,

decide whether the following behaviors represents normal, abnormal behavior, or it depends on the context.

1. Alan's performance at work has suffered because he has been drinking alcohol to excess. Several co-workers have suggested that he seek help for his problem, but he thinks that they're getting alarmed over nothing. "I just enjoy a good time once in a while," he says.
2. Monica has gone away to college and feels lonely, sad, and dejected. Her grades are fine, and she gets along okay with the other students in the dormitory, but inside, she's choked with gloom, hopelessness, and despair.

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3. Boris believes that he's Napoleon reborn. He believes that he is destined to lead the U.S. military forces into a great battle to recover California to space aliens.
4. Natasha panics with anxiety whenever she leaves her home. Her problem escalated gradually until she was absent from work so often that she was fired. She hasn't been out of her house in nine months and is deeply troubled by her problem.