

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of Psychology

Level: 3rd year LMD Clinical Psychology

Instructor: Ms. Saci Meriem

Module: English Language

Lesson n°7: Psychosomatic Disorders

I. Introduction

Psychosomatic disorders are conditions in which psychological factors, particularly emotional stress or trauma; contribute to the development, progression, or exacerbation of physical health problems. These disorders highlight the intricate connection between mind and body, demonstrating how psychological states can manifest as physical symptoms. The term "psychosomatic" combines "psyche" (mind) and "soma" (body); underscoring the interaction between mental and physical health. Psychosomatic disorders are commonly seen in clinical psychology and medicine and can have a significant impact on a person's quality of life.

II. Understanding Psychosomatic Disorders

- ❖ **Definition and Nature** : Psychosomatic disorders involve physical ailments that are caused or worsened by psychological factors, particularly emotional stress, anxiety, or depression. These disorders do not have a clear-cut physical cause but are influenced by emotional and mental factors. For example, an individual may develop chronic pain, gastrointestinal issues, or even cardiovascular conditions as a result of ongoing emotional distress.
- ❖ **Psychosomatic Symptoms**: The symptoms of psychosomatic disorders are physical in nature, but they are often linked to psychological stress. Some common symptoms include:
 - ✓ Chronic pain (headaches, back pain, musculoskeletal pain)
 - ✓ Gastrointestinal problems (irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers)

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- ✓ Respiratory issues (asthma exacerbation, shortness of breath)
- ✓ Cardiovascular symptoms (high blood pressure, palpitations)
- ✓ Fatigue and dizziness

III. Types of Psychosomatic Disorders

Somatic Symptom Disorder (SSD)

- Somatic Symptom Disorder involves excessive focus on physical symptoms that cause significant distress and impairment in daily life. The symptoms may be real and debilitating, but there is often no identifiable medical condition that explains the severity of the symptoms.
- **Symptoms:** Persistent pain or other bodily complaints (e.g., headaches, back pain, stomach issues) without an identifiable medical cause. There may be anxiety about health, frequent doctor visits, and a heightened concern about physical symptoms.
- **Diagnosis:** The diagnosis is made when physical symptoms cause significant distress and lead to disruptions in daily activities, but the symptoms cannot be fully explained by a medical condition.

Conversion Disorder (Functional Neurological Symptom Disorder)

- Conversion Disorder involves neurological symptoms (such as paralysis, blindness, or seizures) that cannot be explained by medical tests or neurological conditions. These symptoms are thought to result from psychological stress.
- **Symptoms:** Paralysis, tremors, non-epileptic seizures, blindness, and other neurological symptoms without a clear medical cause.
- **Etiology:** The symptoms often occur following a stressful or traumatic event and may manifest as a subconscious coping mechanism to avoid emotional distress.

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Hypochondriasis (Health Anxiety)

- Hypochondriasis, or health anxiety, is characterized by an overwhelming fear of having a serious illness, despite the absence of significant medical findings. People with this condition often misinterpret normal bodily sensations or minor symptoms as signs of a severe disease.
- **Symptoms:** Persistent fear of illness, frequent visits to doctors, exaggerated concern about health, and anxiety about being diagnosed with a severe medical condition.
- **Etiology:** This disorder is often linked to a history of illness, high levels of anxiety, or a tendency to catastrophize bodily sensations.

IV. The Mind-Body Connection: Theories Behind Psychosomatic Disorders

Psychosomatic disorders are rooted in the complex interaction between the mind and body. Several theoretical frameworks help explain how psychological factors contribute to the onset or exacerbation of physical symptoms:

- **Psychodynamic:** pioneered by Sigmund Freud, suggests that unconscious conflicts and emotional stress can manifest as physical symptoms. Freud theorized that repressed emotions or unresolved psychological issues could express themselves through bodily symptoms. According to this theory, the body acts as a "container" for psychological conflict.

Example: A person who has unresolved emotional trauma might experience physical symptoms like paralysis or blindness, which are symbolic expressions of repressed emotions.

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- **Biopsychosocial Model:** posits that biological, psychological, and social factors all play a role in the development of psychosomatic disorders. This model emphasizes that mental states, such as stress or anxiety, can influence the body's physiological processes and contribute to the development of physical symptoms.

Example: Chronic stress can lead to an increase in cortisol levels, which in turn can affect the immune system, contribute to inflammation, and exacerbate conditions like asthma or arthritis.

- **Cognitive-Behavioral Theory** focuses on how negative thought patterns and dysfunctional beliefs can influence both emotional and physical health. According to this theory, individuals with psychosomatic disorders may have distorted thinking patterns, such as catastrophizing or excessive worry that worsen their physical symptoms.

Example: A person with chronic pain might believe that the pain signals something severely wrong with their body, increasing anxiety and physical tension, which in turn intensifies the pain.