

Definitions of abnormality

Mental health and the lack of mental health

People have tended to use the term 'normal' when they are referring to people who are mentally healthy. Thus a lack of mental health was referred to as 'abnormal'. The terms 'normal' and 'abnormal' are no longer used, so newer A-level specifications are removing the term 'abnormality'.

If we are considering statistical data (as in the case of the 'statistical infrequency' definition here) then it is appropriate to use the terms 'norms' or 'normal' because these are mathematical concepts. For example, we can work out the norm (or mean) for the IQ or depression scores of any group of people. But the use of the term 'normal' is not appropriate when discussing anything that is non-numerical.

Cultural relativism

All definitions of mental health are related to cultural contexts because what is 'appropriate' is defined by people.

		Statistical infrequency	Deviation from social norms	Failure to function adequately	Deviation from ideal mental health
Explanation		Mental health and the lack of mental health are defined by numbers. What is typical of most people is classed the 'norm', i.e. as mentally healthy, therefore other behaviour is not the 'norm'.	Mental health and the lack of mental health are defined by social rules. The dominant social group ('society') has expectations about how people ought to behave.	Mental health and the lack of mental health are defined as being able to cope with day-to-day life. This view holds that certain everyday behaviours contribute to a sense of psychological and physical wellbeing.	We define a lack of mental health by identifying the signs of mental health. A lack of physical health is defined in relation to physical signs of health, such as a body temperature of about 36–37 degrees Centigrade.
	Example	Most people get out of bed every morning. This behaviour is statistically frequent.	Wearing a bathing suit in a pub is unusual behaviour, whereas the same behaviour on a beach is acceptable.	A person who is behaving irrationally or who is not conforming to social norms is not functioning adequately.	Jahoda listed eight criteria of mental health, none of which are 'overt' symptoms, for example self-esteem, self-actualisation.
Evaluation	+	This definition is appropriate for defining some behaviours. For example, clinical depression may be diagnosed using a depression scale. Scores below a certain point are classed as 'mentally healthy' because most people score below this point.	Such expectations do account for the effect of a person's behaviour on others in their society. For example, being aggressive towards others is undesirable and regarded as not 'healthy' behaviour.	This definition can be useful when identifying whether someone needs help. For example, a person who is unable to live independently would be classed as failing to function adequately and in need of help.	This is a positive approach as it seeks to find behaviours that lead to a healthy life for both the individual and society. For example, being rational means you can understand that your behaviour may distress someone else.
	-	Unusual characteristics can be positive so they shouldn't be seen as a lack of mental health. For example, being cheerful every day is statistically infrequent.	These dominant expectations lead to misdiagnosis because subcultures have different norms about what is acceptable. For example, some cultural groups believe hearing voices is commonplace, whereas others see this as a sign of schizophrenia.	The concept of 'functioning adequately' may lead to discrimination. For example, deciding not to have a fixed abode is regarded as undesirable behaviour.	This approach is culture bound. For example, some cultures emphasise group rather than individual needs and therefore wouldn't see self-actualisation as a healthy behaviour.

