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What's in a name? How the language of mental health diagnoses affects the ability to heal

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What's in a name?

How the language of mental
health diagnoses affects the
ability to heal

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What is a mental health diagnosis?

- Identification of a mental disorder by a licensed clinician
- Mental disorder as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

- First published in 1952 to overcome “Tower of Babel” situation
 - Addressed need for common language within field
 - 4 systems were in use at the end of WW2
- Latest iteration (DSM-5) was published in 2013
- First edition to fifth
 - 132 pages to 947 pages
 - Number of categories and disorders increased similarly
- DSM-5 is a diagnostic manual, not a treatment manual

Mental Health Diagnosis vs Medical Diagnosis

- No clear diagnostic tests
- Criteria can change
- Diagnoses themselves change

Purpose of the DSM

- DSM-5 is a diagnostic manual, not a treatment manual
- Diagnoses are required for insurance billing and medical intervention, not psychotherapeutic interventions

Benefits of a Diagnosis

- Language to describe struggle
 - Helps “connect the dots”
- Connects people with resources
 - Financial
 - Accommodations
 - Community

Problems with a Diagnosis - Misdiagnosis

- Subjectivity
 - Where you are diagnosed matters
- People struggle to give a clear history
- Differential Medical Diagnosis overlooked

Problems with a Diagnosis - Overdiagnosis

- Label becomes identity
- Multiple diagnoses
- Diagnoses linger
- Over reliance on medication

Problems with a Diagnosis - Label becomes Identity

- Younger the label is added, the more the label becomes wrapped in identity
- Normal developmental struggles are seen as pathological
- Agency is lost

Problems with a Diagnosis - Stigma

- How does stigma affect kids?
- Are some diagnoses more stigmatized than others?

How should we talk about diagnoses?

- Person-first language
- Stop using diagnosis language for everyday difficulties
- Reframe labeling language when possible

How do we approach students with diagnoses?

- Identify symptoms without assigning diagnosis/label
 - Address the specific behaviors
 - Don't neglect the basic needs
(Hungry, Tired, Family Stress, Crisis)

In Conclusion

- Diagnoses are imperfect but vital to treatment
- Mental health diagnoses carry stigma but also connect people with resources
- Language matters to how we see each other and ourselves
- When working with students in the school setting, the symptoms/behaviors tell you as much, if not more, than the actual diagnosis
- Check your own biases and self-talk
- Person-first language helps to reorient our language towards compassion and empathy

Don't forget to complete the session evaluation!

V

Victoria Dawkins
University of Alabama at Birmingham
Presenter

K

Katherine Quinnell
Athens State University
Presenter

C

Clista Clanton
University of South Alabama
Presenter

Surveys



Session Evaluation

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