

Somatoform Disorders

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is going to cover somatoform disorders. Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. Somatoform Disorders
2. Hypochondriasis
3. Somatization Disorders
4. Pain Disorders
5. Conversion Disorders
6. Treatment of Somatoform Disorders

1. Somatoform Disorders

A somatoform disorder is a category of mental disorders where a person has--or at least claims to have--physical symptoms of a problem without any physical cause. The brain itself is causing the person to feel like they have physical symptoms.

Now, it is important to clarify that a person with a somatoform disorder isn't "faking it," versus a condition like Munchausen Syndrome, where a person fakes a medical problem to get attention from others. Somatoform disorders can take different forms in different people.

2. Hypochondriasis

Hypochondriasis is a widely known somatoform disorder where a person interprets small, normal bodily functions as a symptom of a more serious illness; this person is absolutely convinced that they have a physical illness, even though they don't actually have one. A hypochondriac, for instance, will visit the doctor frequently. They will also be constantly anxious and concerned about their well-being.



TERM TO KNOW

Hypochondriasis

A somatoform disorder when a person interprets small, normal bodily functions as symptoms of serious illness

3. Somatization Disorders

A **somatization disorder** is when a person complains about multiple physical and mental problems without any accompanying physical cause. The person may visit the doctor like a hypochondriac and will have a constant feeling of being sick.

This is generally a long-term, pervasive condition. It presents itself in a variety of symptoms such as pain in multiple places throughout the body, gastrointestinal problems, difficulty swallowing, sexual dysfunction, or mental problems—all without a physical cause. As you can see, somatization disorders cover a wide range of problems.



TERM TO KNOW

Somatization Disorder

A somatoform disorder when a person complains about multiple physical and mental problems, but without any physical causes

4. Pain Disorders

A **pain disorder** is where a person experiences chronic and, many times, serious pain in one or more places throughout their body. This condition can be debilitating. This type of disorder has a psychological origin, not a physical one, as well. A pain disorder can last anywhere from a few hours to years. It can be a condition that a person lives with for a significant portion of their life.

Pain disorders often result in relation to an accident or illness. A person who suffers an accident or illness thinks that they *should* be feeling some physical pain, but the pain they are feeling isn't actually caused by that accident or illness. Instead, it is thought to be a result of some form of significant stress. The person may be taking that psychological harm or stress and converting it into a physical symptom.



DID YOU KNOW

Pain disorders are more likely to appear in collectivistic cultures like those in Asia or Mexico. In these cultures, people are more focused on the group and on the people around them.



TERM TO KNOW

Pain Disorder

A somatoform disorder where a person experiences chronic and often serious pain in one or more places, but which is psychological in origin, not physical

5. Conversion Disorders

A **conversion disorder** is a type of somatoform disorder where a person converts their anxiety or severe emotional problems into physical symptoms. This can often take the form of a sensory or physical disability.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A person with a conversion disorder might say that they are unable to move their limbs. The person cannot do so, even when asked or forced to. A person can also suddenly become deaf, blind, or dumb.

Often, a person with a conversion disorder has a lack of concern for the physical problem itself. Someone with this type of disorder may suddenly go blind, but they won't be incredibly worried about the fact that they are blind. They might, however, become very defensive or concerned about those underlying psychological harms that caused this conversion disorder to occur.



TERM TO KNOW

Conversion Disorder

A type of somatoform disorder where a person “converts” anxiety or severe emotional problems into physical symptoms

6. Treatment of Somatoform Disorders

Treatment of somatoform disorders may involve the use of drugs or medical treatments, but without any physical problems, most of the time these treatments are ineffective. One of the most effective ways of treating somatoform disorders is with the use of psychotherapy. A person learns to recognize the unhealthy thought patterns and ways of coping that contribute to the disorder. Cognitive behavioral therapy has proven to be very effective in the treatment of these disorders.



SUMMARY

A **somatoform disorder** is a category of mental disorders where a person has physical symptoms without a physical cause. **Hypochondriasis** is when a person interprets normal bodily functions as symptoms of a serious illness. **Somatization** is when a person claims to have multiple physical or mental problems without any physical cause. **Pain disorders** are when a person physically experiences chronic and often serious pain without an underlying physical cause. **Conversion disorders** are characterized by physical symptoms “converted” from an anxiety or emotional problem. This can take the form of a serious disability.

Treatment for these types of disorders may include medical treatment, but this is usually ineffective. One of the most effective ways of treatment is the use of psychotherapy; cognitive behavioral therapy has proven to be very effective.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia Author Erick Taggart.



TERMS TO KNOW

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A somatoform disorder when a person interprets small, normal bodily functions as symptoms of serious illness.

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A somatoform disorder where a person experiences chronic and often serious pain in one or more place, but which is psychological in origin, not physical.

Somatization Disorder

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