

What's in a name? Psychiatrists' labeling practices may be desensitizing the public

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Does the growing number of psychiatric disorder diagnoses have an effect on people with mental illnesses? According to a new study, as definitions of mental illnesses become broader, people who show signs of depression and other common mental illnesses are less likely to evoke a supportive response from friends and family members as are people with other severe mental disorders. This new study was released in a recent issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

Author Brea L. Perry studied interviews conducted with 165 individuals with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, [major depression](#), and other less severe disorders, who were undergoing [mental health treatment](#) for the first time. She found that those with more socially-accepted and commonplace mental illnesses, such as depression and mild mood disorders, did not receive strong reactions to their conditions from family members, friends, or others with whom they came in contact. Brea stated that as a result, their support networks may be less willing to take on caregiver responsibilities or to excuse them when their behavior deviates from what is considered normal.

Perry wrote, "Perhaps because so many people are diagnosed and subsequently treated successfully, signs of depression do not alarm friends and family members to the same degree as disorders known to severely affect functioning."

While commonplace mental illnesses such as depression are clearly defined by professionals as legitimate medical conditions, Perry found

that the public does not always deem them as justifiable grounds for taking on a "sick" role.

This study also found that diagnosing someone with a severe mental illness that is more outwardly recognizable such as schizophrenia and the [manic phase](#) of bipolar disorder can lead to a higher amount of rejection and discrimination by acquaintances and strangers while at the same time creating a stronger social support system among close friends and family.

The author wrote, "Day-to-day emotional and instrumental support is likely to play a critical role in recovery from mental illness."

More information: "The Labeling Paradox: Stigma, the Sick Role, and Social Networks in Mental Illness":

hsb.sagepub.com/content/52/4/460.full.pdf+html

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