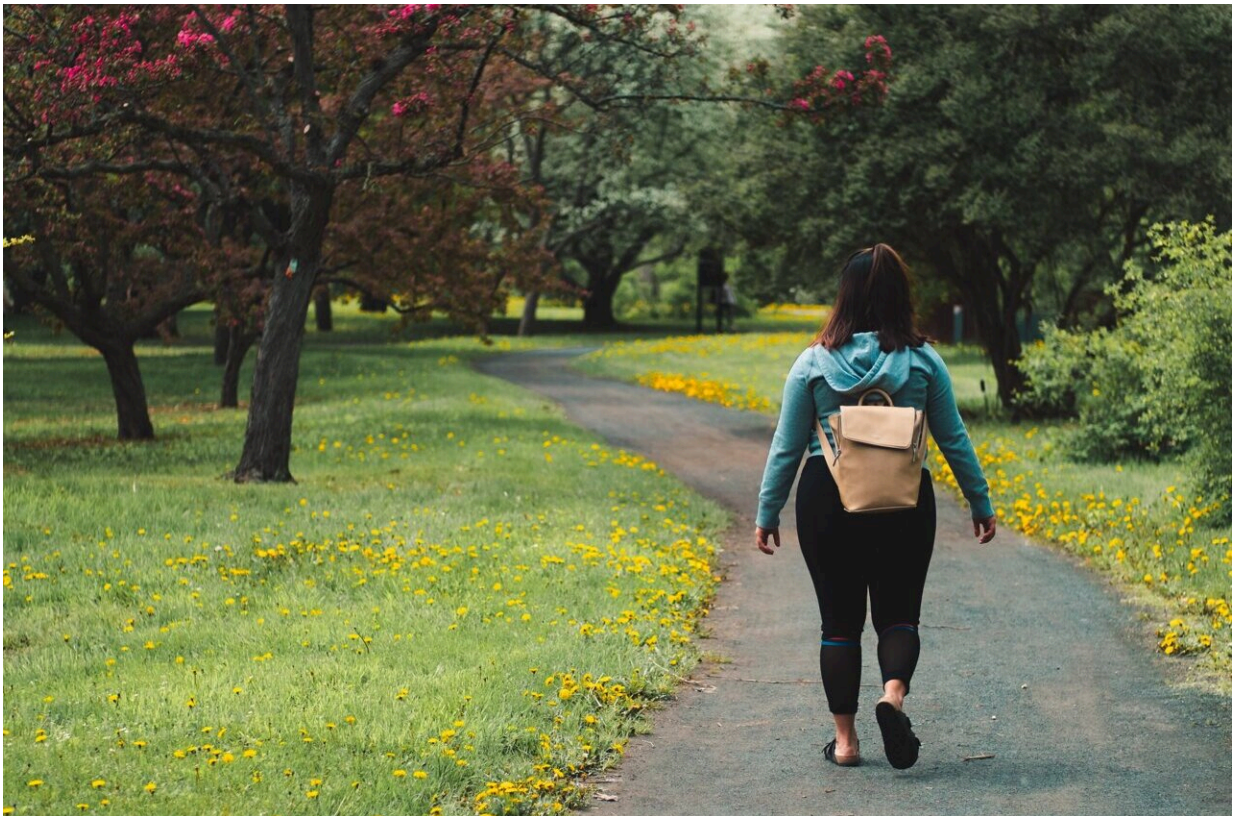


Study suggests depictions of depression are often misleading

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[A Finnish study](#), appearing in the journal *Psychopathology*, shows that people are commonly given misleading information about depression. According to the researchers, inaccurate information makes it harder for

people to understand the causes of their distress.

Most [psychiatric diagnoses](#) are purely descriptive. For example, a [diagnosis](#) of [depression](#) is only a description of the various psychological symptoms—not the cause. Yet depression is often talked about as a disorder that causes low mood and other symptoms.

Researchers describe this as a form of circular reasoning, which means that psychiatric diagnoses are frequently talked about circularly, as if they described the causes for symptoms. This makes it difficult for people to understand their distress.

"Depression should be considered as a diagnosis similar to a headache. Both are medical diagnoses, but neither explains what causes the symptoms. Like a headache, depression is a description of a problem that can have many different causes. A diagnosis of depression does not explain the cause of depressed mood any more than a diagnosis of headaches explains the cause of pain in the head," says Jani Kajanoja, a postdoctoral researcher and a [medical doctor](#) specializing in psychiatry at the University of Turku in Finland.

This [misconception](#) is also perpetuated by [mental health professionals](#), shows a recent study by the University of Turku and the University of the Arts Helsinki.

In the study, the researchers analyzed publicly-available information on depression provided by leading international health organizations.

The researchers selected the websites of English-language organizations whose information on depression was the most influential according to search engine results. The organizations included the World Health Organization (WHO), the American Psychiatric Association (APA), National Health Service (NHS) in the UK, and Harvard and Johns

Hopkins Universities, among others.

Most organizations portrayed depression on their websites as a disorder that causes symptoms and/or explains what causes the symptoms, although this is not the case. None of the organizations presented the diagnosis as a pure description of symptoms, as would have been accurate.

"Presenting depression as a uniform disorder that causes [depressive symptoms](#) is circular reasoning that blurs our understanding of the nature of mental health problems and makes it harder for people to understand their distress," says Kajanoja.

The researchers suggest that the problem may be caused by cognitive bias.

"People seem to have a tendency to think that a diagnosis is an explanation even when it is not. It is important for professionals not to reinforce this misconception with their communication, and instead help people to understand their condition," says Professor and Neuropsychologist Jussi Valtonen from the University of the Arts Helsinki.

More information: Jani Kajanoja et al, A Descriptive Diagnosis or a Causal Explanation? Accuracy of Depictions of Depression on Authoritative Health Organization Websites, *Psychopathology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1159/000538458](https://doi.org/10.1159/000538458)

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