

Psychiatrists advocate new kind of disorder

Thousands of families would get treatment for ill relationships

BY SHANKAR VEDANTAM
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Some of the nation's top psychiatrists are advocating the creation of a new category of mental illness that could profoundly alter the practice of psychiatry and result in tens of thousands of families being diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder.

In a monograph being circulated by the American Psychiatric Association, the doctors recommend that a category called "Relational Disorders" be added to the next edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, which is the psychiatric profession's official guide for defining emotional and mental illnesses.

Unlike every psychiatric diagnosis so far, this new type of disorder would identify sickness in groups of individuals and in the relationships between them. This is a profound conceptual shift from the medical model of psychiatry, in which illnesses are diagnosed in individuals.

In the proposed class of illness, an individual might be healthy except when it comes to certain relationships. For the moment, the new category of mental illness would apply only to family relationships. If the new category is created, couples who constantly quarrel and parents and children who clash could be diagnosed with mental illness and treated, possibly with drugs. Relationships between siblings could be next.

Doctors hope that creating a new disease category would encourage systematic study, drug trials and insurance coverage.

The move, however, is already provoking controversy and opposition inside and outside psychiatry, as doctors and society grapple with whether such troubled relationships are social problems or medical ailments.

Psychiatrists have long been interested in such relationships, because they often lead to marital and child abuse as well as depression. But so far, doctors have not sought to label the relationships, themselves, as pathological.

The psychiatrists calling for the creation of a relational disorders category are led by Michael First of Columbia University, and David Reiss of George Washington University. They say troubled relationships are the reason many people seek psychiatric help and that improving those relationships can lift people out of depression, improve cardiac and immune system functioning and even heal wounds faster.

Several psychiatrists oppose the move, portending a clash that could last for months or years. Some worry that the new category of disorders would fuel fears that psychiatrists are inventing disorders as a backdoor way to fix social problems.

Treating marital and child abuse has long required that clinicians look at relationships, Reiss and First said in interviews. Spouses who violently clash with each other, for example, can divorce and go on to have perfectly normal relationships with other people. Similarly, a parent may have a normal relationship with one child but an abusive relationship with another.

"If you look at a person in isolation, you see nothing — something only happens in the interaction," First said. "That makes the disorder in the relationship. . . . It's the way two people interact that creates the fire, the explosion."