Mental Illness or Not?: Activity Description and Purpose

This group discussion activity was developed for an introductory undergraduate psychology course, although it would also be an appropriate early-term activity for an Abnormal Psychology course. The only preparation required is making copies of the handout. I normally ask that students complete the activity in groups of four or five to provide exposure to a variety of perspectives while allowing enough space for everyone to participate, but it would work in a wide range of group sizes. The activity takes about twenty minutes to complete, plus an additional ten to twenty minutes for debriefing with the entire class.

After introducing the activity and asking students to form groups, I emphasize that the point of the activity is not to generate a “correct” diagnosis but rather to consider 1) how context influences the meaning of behavior and 2) what kinds of information are—or should be—used to determine the existence of mental illness.

Each case in the activity is meant to spark conversation in a particular way and can be adapted to better match students’ characteristics and interests. Case 1 is a fairly unambiguous portrayal of social anxiety, a concept with which most students are familiar. Each term, I have several students privately identify as being shy or socially anxious. By describing an extreme example of a common experience, Case 1 is meant to foster empathy. Instructors could modify the description to align with psychological concerns or characteristics prevalent in their students.

Case 2 is based on a real, controversial public figure (which can also be revised to reflect polarizing issues of importance to students). This case description expands upon the prior one in several ways; students are asked to consider negatively-valued personality traits, violations of social norms, and conflict between the views of the subject and those around him.

Case 3 raises the issue of cultural context. The description provided is an exaggeration of a local stereotype and should be tailored to the culture of the institution in which the activity is used. While few students will identify the target as having a mental illness, they should be challenged during debriefing to imagine how she might be perceived in a different geographic location or historic era (or if she belonged to a different demographic group).

To debrief, students are asked to justify their decision for each case while making explicit any information they presupposed in reaching that decision. Generally, students end up identifying emotional distress, rarity, inability to fulfill life roles, and deviation from social norms as factors they considered. Students are then asked to generate examples of attributes or behaviors fitting one or more of the aforementioned criteria that would not be considered disordered. Thus, they experience firsthand the difficulty of defining mental illness.

The purpose of this activity is to foster critical thinking about mental illness. In my experience, most undergraduates are used to thinking of mental illness in terms of discrete, monolithic diagnoses. This activity demonstrates that distress, dysfunction, and disorder are a matter of degree. It also allows students to discover for themselves the subjectivity inherent in diagnostic categories, providing a convenient segue into a discussion of values and historic changes in the DSM.

Importantly, this activity is intended to spark a discussion of mental illness without contributing to stigmatization. By removing the usual requirement that students assign the “correct” diagnosis to a case subject, the person’s humanness takes a front seat to his or her mental health status. Being asked to identify additional information that would inform their decision serves as an implicit reminder that an individual is far more complex than the few facts that a third party might consider relevant to a psychiatric diagnosis. Students must exercise
perspective-taking in the debriefing of Case 3, in particular, when they are asked to imagine a context in which the target’s behavior would likely be seen as disordered. This framing allows students to reflect on their own cultural assumptions regarding normality and health.

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**Mental Illness or Not?**

In this activity, you will critically consider what constitutes mental illness or psychological disorder. As a group, read the brief description of each case and discuss whether or not you think the person in question is likely to have a mental illness. Afterward, you will be asked to develop working definitions of mental illness and mental health based on your discussion.

**Case 1: Tony**

Tony is a very shy, middle-aged family man. Because of his fear of social interaction, his wife has to make all of the family appointments, answer the house phone whenever someone calls, and even run simple errands like picking up dinner. He has few friends, all of whom he met through his wife. While Tony holds a respectable job, his anxiety makes it difficult for him to interact with new clients. He feels tired, defeated, and humiliated at the end of each workday.

1. Does Tony have a mental illness? Why or why not?
2. What additional information would help you determine whether or not he has a mental illness?

**Case 2: Mr. Truman**

Mr. Truman is a successful public figure who denies having grown up in a privileged environment. Those around him feel he is manipulative, power-hungry, and narcissistic. He feels no regret for hurting others and regularly makes people uncomfortable with his racist and xenophobic remarks. Many believe that he is unqualified for his position of power. Mr. Truman maintains that he is extremely healthy in both mind and body.

1. Does Mr. Truman have a mental illness? Why or why not?
2. What additional information would help you determine whether or not he has a mental illness?

**Case 3: Anna**

Anna has always been concerned about her health. She eats only vegan, organic, non-GMO food. She bikes six miles to work and back every day, lifts weights four times a week, and goes for long hikes with her dog on the weekends. She gets upset if she has to deviate from her routine and occasionally cancels plans if she expects them to interfere with her diet. Despite Anna’s stated motivation to be healthy, some of her loved ones worry that her lifestyle is too extreme.

1. Does Anna have a mental illness? Why or why not?
2. What additional information would help you determine whether or not he has a mental illness?

**Follow-up Questions**

1. What is a mental illness? How would you determine if someone has a psychological disorder?
2. What is NOT a mental illness? Why not?
3. What is mental health?