



SOMATIC SYMPTOMS AND RELATED DISORDERS

SOMATIC SYMPTOM DISORDER

What it is:

Somatic symptom disorder is characterised by the individual experiencing physical symptoms that suggest physical illness or injury, for example chronic pain. However these symptoms cannot be fully explained by a general medical condition or by the direct effect of a substance, and are not attributable to another mental disorder. Usually in such cases medical test results are either normal or do not explain the individual's symptoms. Individuals with somatic symptom disorder also experience extreme anxiety and worry about their symptoms and health, and this worry is often out of proportion with the severity of the physical complaint.

It is important to note that somatic symptom disorder should not be diagnosed simply because no other physical or medical cause for the somatic symptom has been found. Rather, the somatic symptoms should be considered together with the individual displaying abnormal thoughts, feelings and behaviours regarding the symptoms. These include behaviours such as excessive worry about illness, excessive worry about the somatic symptoms, attributing normal bodily functions to physical illness, and avoiding physical activity for fear of bodily harm.

Common symptoms:

1. The individual experiences one or more somatic (physical) symptoms that cause distress and disruption in their everyday life
2. Constant thoughts about the somatic symptoms
3. Disproportionate thoughts and fears regarding the somatic symptoms
4. The individual experiences continuous high levels of anxiety regarding their health or somatic symptoms
5. The individual spends excessive time and resources on these health concerns



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Causes:

There are a number of possible risk factors for somatic symptom disorder. Negative affectivity (the disposition to experience negative emotions) has been identified as a potential risk factor for somatic syndrome disorder. Individuals who have experienced frequent stressful or traumatic life events, and who have lower educational and socioeconomic status have also been found to be at greater risk of developing the disorder. Mental disorders such as depression and anxiety have also been found to co-exist with somatic symptom disorder, and may make the symptoms and impairment associated with the disorder worse.

Remember to always consult a mental health or medical practitioner regarding any questions you may have about a mental health diagnosis and treatment options.

This factsheet is based on information obtained from the DSM-5:
American Psychiatric Association, 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition.*