Special Communication

Unintended Consequences of Changing the Definition of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in DSM-5
Critique and Call for Action

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Are changes to the definition of posttraumatic stress disorder in DSM-5 a step forward?—No.

The 2013 DSM-5, the first major revision of US psychiatric nomenclature since 1994’s DSM-IV, was coordinated by the American Psychiatric Association in a manner to ensure revisions were empirically supported and maintained continuity with previous editions.1,2 Although many important evidence-based changes resulted, core criteria and diagnostic language for most common conditions affecting adults remained unchanged, safeguarding continued use of treatments validated over decades.1,3

A notable exception was posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Criteria were added and major wording changes were made to symptoms that have been foundational clinical descriptors even before DSM-IV—and revisions that workgroup members themselves acknowledged were controversial.4–6 Their rationale4–6 appeared to reflect selective interpretations of evidence (eg, based on nonsystematic literature review and overlooking complex neuroscience domains); cognitive theory influenced key changes, potentially lessening the emphasis of other well-established neurobiological models underlying evidence-based treatments.2,4 Emerging research has demonstrated that the revised definition offers no improvement in clinical utility, identifies different individuals, and excludes many individuals meeting previous criteria.9–11

This article details problematic changes, implications, and rationale for immediate action.

Trauma Definition: Splitting Hairs

Although DSM-5 correctly removed the DSM-IV requirement for a fear-based response to the traumatic event (Criterion A2), an important modification for first responders, it also considerably tightened the scope of qualifying events to reduce “bracket creep” and “frivolous tort or compensation claims.” This effectively ties clinicians’ hands in applying the trauma criterion when clinically appropriate. For example, a parent who develops disabling PTSD symptoms after losing a child to aggressive cancer can no longer be diagnosed as having PTSD because the death was nonviolent/accidental (adjustment disorder is recommended). A soldier symptomatic after learning of the violent death of a trusted leader cannot technically meet criteria unless they were “close friends” or the soldier experienced “repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details” occupationally.

Symptom Criteria: Unsupported Changes

Of the 17 original DSM-IV symptoms, 8 underwent significant edits (4 were markedly reformulated) and 3 symptoms were added. These changes introduced complex phrasing, alterations in meaning, and exponentially increased diagnostic permutations,12 sometimes replacing the DSM’s foundation of reportable, observable symptoms with nonspecific abstractions (subject to interpretations and judgments) and overlapping depressive cognitions/emotions. The most problematic changes were: (1) Replacing the fundamental reexperiencing term with intrusion and requiring intrusive memories to be “involuntary,” discounting repetitive thought/memory processes common in PTSD with intentional or habitual qualities.3,13 (2) Rewording “restricted range of affect” (emotional numbing), likely the most predictive DSM-IV symptom of chronicity and impairment,14,15 to “persistent inability to experience positive emotions.”1 This discounts the breadth of numbing encompassing non-“positive” emotions (eg, grief) and departs from decades of evidence that many survivors of severe trauma experience alexithymia or dissociation through corticobulic overmodulation.16,17 (3) Replacing another highly predictive numbing-related symptom,14,15 “foreshortened sense of future”—well-suited, for example, for evaluating a veteran feeling cut off from humanity because of involvement in events challenging moral or spiritual integrity—with “persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world (eg, ‘I am bad’,…”My whole nervous system is completely ruined”).4 (4) Adding “persistent distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others,” confuting self-blame with attributional judgments of appropriateness of blame toward others (eg, a supervisor or alleged perpetrator).1 (5) Adding a catch-all symptom criterion, “persistent negative emotional state (eg, fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame),” overlapping other symptoms.1 (6) Adding “reckless or self-destructive behavior,” a nonspecific sign of impairment, as PTSD-specific symptom.

Symptoms in DSM-5 were restructured into 4 clusters based on factor analyses, including new, separate requirements for active avoidance (involving only 2 of 20 symptoms) and negative cognitions/mood. However, factor analyses have produced inconsistent results (even within 4-factor solutions),4,18,19 and the new avoidance criterion is emerging as the most common reason for definitional discordance.9,20,21 Military researchers expressed concern that this will exclude personnel who learn to override avoidance through training.22

Posttraumatic stress disorder was also moved out of anxiety disorders and into a “trauma- and stressor-related disorders” chapter in DSM-5 with adjustment disorders (and other conditions), which have little scientific rationale for combining.23 Adjustment disorder, recommended in DSM-5 for subthreshold PTSD, is an ill-defined diagnosis of exclusion that does not support trauma-focused treatment and can have unintended consequences (eg, declined insurance reimbursement or separation from military without benefits).
Evidence of Flawed Consensus Processes

Although the PTSD workgroup followed the extensive American Psychiatric Association processes, there were no a priori scientific standards for evaluating the many proposed changes or feedback received. ⁴⁻⁶ For example, PTSD criteria were significantly loosened after initially drafting the definition, based essentially on observational prevalence data (to match DSM-IV prevalence). ²⁴⁻²⁵ In parallel, a major revision was being undertaken for International Classification of Diseases, Eleventh Revision (ICD-11). ²⁰⁻²¹ However, diametrically different conclusions were reached as to what was necessary, with the workgroup for DSM-5 producing the most complex PTSD definition to date (20 symptoms and 4 clusters) and the workgroup for ICD-11 producing the simplest (6 symptoms and 3 clusters). ¹²⁻²⁶ These divergent conceptualizations derived through parallel processes (even involving some of the same members) epitomize (and solidify) disagreement across the field and highlight limitations with consensus processes relying on expert opinion. ²⁷

Head-to-Head Comparisons

Studies comparing DSM-IV criteria and proposed DSM-5 criteria were conducted largely in nonrepresentative convenience samples (eg, Internet surveys and research registries) using nonindependent measures (eg, DSM-IV items appended with DSM-5 items), biasing concordance estimates. ²⁰⁻²¹,²⁴⁻²⁵ The only clinician test-retest evaluation of the PTSD definition in DSM-5 showed higher reliabilities than other conditions (κs, 0.63-0.69). ²⁸⁻²⁹ However, half of PTSD diagnoses were discordant, and results are nongeneralizable given uncharacteristically high prevalence in the veteran-specific study samples (47%-50%). ²⁸⁻²⁹ Since the publication of DSM-5, several studies have confirmed high discordance between the definitions of PTSD in DSM-IV and DSM-5 (even using nonindependent measures) and, more importantly, have found no evidence for improved clinical utility based on comparable impairment and comorbidities. One well-controlled head-to-head comparison showed that 30% of combat soldiers who met DSM-IV symptom criteria failed to meet DSM-5 criteria. Discordance among those who met either criteria was nearly 50% and would have been higher had trauma criterion revisions been considered; discordance was also high comparing item-by-item wording changes. A psychometric comparison of the original and revised PTSD checklists in a convenience sample of college students found discordance comparable to the infantry study; item-by-item discordance (κs) was likely also comparable, based on reliability correlations presented. ²⁸⁻²⁹ The ICD-11 definition offered no clinical advantages and even greater discordance. One multinational study scored diagnostic interviews according to DSM-IV, DSM-5, ICD-10, and ICD-11 criteria; concordance across all 4 definitions was so low, with comparable impairment, that this research team (which included DSM-5 and ICD-11 PTSD workgroup chairs) even suggested using all 4 definitions for future epidemiological studies. Such a recommendation essentially throws out the definitional foundation altogether (and doubles prevalence).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of revising a psychiatric definition is to enhance diagnostic accuracy, clinical utility, and communication. The DSM-5 definition of PTSD provides no improvement in these areas. This has profound implications for patients with PTSD per DSM-IV for whom well-established treatments exist and for patients with impairment meeting DSM-5 criteria for whom treatments may not generalize. Psychiatric case definitions are not implemented in health care settings as hypotheses, and there are screening, insurance, disability, and forensic ramifications. Essentially, what the new definition appears to have accomplished is a disruption of the long chain of links, established through epidemiological, neurobiological, and treatment studies, providing the foundation of current practice for patients with PTSD. Expedited reconsideration or revision is required.

Meanwhile, in the interests of patient care, continued use of the DSM-IV formulation and corresponding instruments is necessary. Research proposals enrolling patients with PTSD should be closely scrutinized if their design does not encompass DSM-IV criteria. Patients who meet DSM-IV criteria should continue to be diagnosed as having PTSD and not denied trauma-focused treatment or entitlements based on the DSM-5 definition. We cannot assume that established neurobiological or treatment paradigms apply to patients identified only under DSM-5 (or ICD-11).
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