

Somatic symptom disorder has replaced what was formerly known as “somatization disorder” in previous editions of the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM). It reflects a great understanding and more knowledge about what was previously known about this condition and psychosomatic symptoms.

Somatic symptom disorder involves being distressed or having one’s life disrupted by concerns involving physical symptoms when there is no obvious physical or medical cause for the symptoms.

A person with this disorder may worry excessively over certain health sensations and symptoms, such as stomach pain, that generally healthcare professionals cannot explain. A person with somatic symptom disorder may believe the sensation indicates a serious illness, like stomach cancer, although they may not have objective evidence from a doctor to substantiate that concern.

A person with this condition may go to great lengths to attend to or to investigate their health symptoms. They typically will visit multiple doctors and multiple specialists in an effort to have their physical symptoms properly diagnosed and explained. Many doctors feel like a patient with this condition may be “faking” or exaggerating their symptoms or their severity.

The diagnostic criteria for somatic symptom disorder states that the person must exhibit signs of the condition (e.g., concern over physical health or anxiety over somatic sensations) for at least 6 months, although the actual pain or symptom does not have to be present the entire duration. For most people with this concern, the symptoms are serious enough to cause significant problems in multiple aspects of their life. Additionally, most have tried multiple forms of treatment with little or no success.

Before a person is diagnosed with this condition, a full medical workup and physical examination is warranted, to rule out any medical or physical causes. For instance, some types of cancer can have unusual symptom presentations that may be left undiagnosed by inexperienced healthcare providers.

DSM-5 diagnostic code: 300.82