

How can we define normal? And how would you describe mental illness to someone who knew nothing about the topic?

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Essay Prompt: An alien ship drops out of the sky from another planet. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your viewpoint), they have been watching YouTube videos of the Kardashians and other reality shows while traveling to our planet, and they are very confused about what is a “normal” human being. So far in class we have interviewed three different patients with three different mental illnesses. If we follow through with this logic, then persons without a “diagnosis” are apparently “normal.” How would you explain mental illness to an alien who has no biases or knowledge of what it is like to have a mental illness? How would you decide what is normal and what is abnormal? Who should decide what is normal? In the citation provided, leading psychiatrists were the ones deciding normal versus abnormal for the world (1). Please write an essay considering one or more of the questions detailed here in this prompt (or ask and answer your own question!), drawing on the citation provided, class interviews, optional reading, and/or your own experiences (1).

The term “normal” has long been used as a generic word of description, often being used in conversation, or written without much thought or worry behind what the word truly means. Many often assume the word has a standard definition and application, but there is a substantial variability in the meaning of the term that is highly subjective based on an individual. To some, normal may be used to describe the unchanged or unaltered natural condition of a subject, while to

others, the term may be used as a label put on the most commonly occurring variety of any given subject. Using the word “normal” can be efficient and useful, but it also has its shortcomings and potential for harm. The use of the term “normal” can enhance efficiency within industries, but it also perpetuates a long-standing, often unknowingly judgmental ideology. This can lead to unnecessary compartmentalization of people,

imposing limitations, and expectations on these divisions.

Perhaps the most relevant topic of discussion regarding normalcy is how the term is applied to describe people. Specifically pertaining to the discussion of mental illness, it has become commonplace in society to label those without mental illness as normal, and to use other, potentially offensive, or demeaning terms, to describe those who do have a mental illness. There are numerous ways in which mental illness has been defined, varying depending on the setting. A more general definition describes mental illnesses as conditions with changes to emotion, thinking, or behavior (4). This description provides the broad strokes of what mental illness is but lacks what is needed to apply the definition in a useful way. In a more medical setting, mental illnesses can be defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder, with a wide range of severity and varying levels of impairment (2). This definition provides a better framework for applying the term, as it clarifies that each case may be different and unique under the wide umbrella of "normalcy." It is undeniably important to distinguish who needs medical assistance or treatment and to what extent they need it. This is especially true regarding the brain, which does not always reflect issues through physical appearance. However, it is unfortunate that, in many cases, labeling people is not used for medical or professional purposes but instead to diminish the abilities of others. This is the major pitfall of using the term "normal." Often, those labeled as "normal" are unaffected, while those labeled with other terms may suffer. This can include limitations being placed upon them, as people might feel compelled to act differently toward them.

There are many examples that highlight the diversity and perseverance of those who may be affected. Neurodivergence is a term commonly

associated with autism spectrum disorder and related conditions. Neurodivergence, and the related term of neurodiversity, promotes inclusivity, respect, and understanding of all people (3). Numerous people with a wide variety of neurodivergence have made it clear that they should rightfully be treated with the same level of respect and dignity as any other person. People should not feel the need to act differently towards those with some form of neurodivergence.

Outside of professional or medical industries, using normal as a means by which to divide people is not a very useful or moral practice. Normal is very subjective and should only be used in practical settings when it is necessary to have defined groupings. The otherwise trivial uses of normal, more often than not, causes harm by belittling and underestimating the abilities of others. When considering the term "normal," it is important to recognize its origins and who is responsible for defining what it means. Often, this duty is entrusted to professionals. They are tasked to define what normal is in their respective fields, and what variables need to change to lose the label of normal. Many institutions have provided definitions for normal that are mostly along the lines of conforming to a type, standard, or regular pattern (5). It is clear there may be a great degree of ambiguity when it comes to the interpretation and application of these definitions. To tie this back to the discussion of mental illness, medical professionals and researchers are allotted with specifying criteria for certain mental conditions so they can be defined based upon reliable data, symptoms, and behaviors. This clarification is important and necessary to ensure proper help and treatment. There is a high responsibility placed upon those who define normal within the medical field, and this highlights how normal can be a useful tool.

As described above, defining normal can be necessary in medical settings. The functions and

operations of specific body parts between people show little to no variation, so it is important to have a defined baseline to determine if there is an issue that needs to be addressed. This is true when describing mental illness as well. In describing mental illness to someone who previously knew nothing about the topic, it would be important to first explain the different regions and parts of the brain, defining the functions of these systems and how they relate to the body as a whole. It is key to explain what part of consciousness, behaviors, thoughts, and actions each part of the brain contributes to. The next step in the process would be to explain what can impact each of these systems. This could include explaining chemical, electrical, or physical changes to the brain. It would also be critical to explain what could be brought about due to an alteration in each of the parts or systems. There are many symptoms and conditions that can have a varying impact on people's lives, and it would be necessary to describe the multitude of cases that could arise. The most paramount part of the process would be to confirm the understanding that mental illnesses are similar to many other medical conditions, in that they are often completely out of the person's control, and that those with mental illnesses should not be thought of as less than those with conditions that do not affect thought or behavior.

The issue of defining normal is a very thought-provoking discussion which impacts many people on a daily basis. Each person is unique, so the topic is very heterogeneous by nature. While there are some negative side effects of the usage of the term "normal," it would be ignorant to completely overlook the benefits associated with being able to know who may need treatment or help.

To conclude the discussion, it should be recognized that "normal" is highly dependent on perspective and is a very subjective term that

should be used cautiously. Defining normal is important in certain industries to ensure proper procedures and necessary actions are taken when needed. Similarly, defining mental illness requires a careful approach, treating it with the same rigor as any other medical condition, with clear definitions of critical areas and thorough explanations of symptoms and necessary actions. Defining normal is a responsibility that should be entrusted to those who use it solely for the purpose of good and helping others.

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