Neuroses and neuroticism: What's the difference?

By Adam Felman   https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/246608.php

The word neuroses was originally coined in the 18th century to label a range of psychological disorders that could not usually be linked to a physical cause. It is often confused for neuroticism, a personality trait.

There is no single definition of neurosis. Neurosis was, until recently, a diagnosable psychological disorder that interferes with quality of life without disrupting an individual's perception of reality.

Some psychologists and psychiatrists use the term neurosis to refer to anxious symptoms and behaviors. Other doctors use the term to describe a spectrum of mental illnesses outside of psychotic disorders. Psychoanalysts, such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, described the thought process itself using the term neurosis.

In 1980, the third publication of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) removed the term neurosis.

This article will discuss how neuroticism differs from neuroses and personality disorders, as well as how to recognize the signs of an anxiety disorder similar to neuroses. It will also give a few tips on handling some of the psychological effects of neuroticism.

Fast facts on neuroses and neuroticism

- "Neuroses" is a term used in many different ways related to abnormal psychological processes.

- Neuroticism has been used to describe a personality trait that does not impair everyday function.

- Neuroticism is one of the Big Five personality traits found in personality tests across a range of cultures.

- Neurosis is no longer used as a diagnosed, and neuroses are now diagnosed as depressive or anxiety disorders.

- Although disused, the neurosis diagnosis is important for understanding how psychological disorders are treated today.

What is neuroticism?

Neuroticism is a long-term tendency to be in a negative or anxious emotional state. It is not a medical condition but a personality trait. People often confuse this with neurosis.

Neuroticism is one of the traits that make up the [five-factor model of personality](#) alongside extraversion, agreeability, conscientiousness, and openness. This model is used in personality evaluations and tests across a wide range of cultures.

People with neuroticism tend to have more depressed moods and suffer from feelings of guilt, envy, anger, and anxiety more frequently and more severely than other individuals.

They can be particularly sensitive to environmental [stress](#). People with neuroticism may see everyday situations as menacing and major. Frustrations that may be experienced by others as trivial may become problematic and lead to despair.

An individual with neuroticism may be self-conscious and shy. They may tend to internalize [phobias](#)and other neurotic traits, such as anxiety, panic, aggression, negativity, and [depression](#). Neuroticism is an ongoing emotional state defined by these negative reactions and feelings.

Despite not qualifying as a diagnosis, psychologists and psychiatrists do not dismiss a personality that shows a heavy tilt towards neuroticism as unimportant for mental wellbeing. Dr. Benjamin B. Lahey, of the University of Chicago's Departments of Health Studies and Psychiatry and Behavioral Neuroscience, said in a [2009 manuscript](#):

"Although not widely appreciated, there is growing evidence that neuroticism is a psychological trait of profound public health significance. Neuroticism is a robust correlate and predictor of many different mental and physical disorders, comorbidity among them, and the frequency of mental and general health service use."

While neuroticism is not a diagnosis, or even a concern in an otherwise well-balanced personality, having it can feed into different mental and physical health problems.

Neuroticism or neurosis?

Neurosis is complex, and research offers more than one explanation. However, it is different from neuroticism.

In basic terms, neurosis is a disorder involving obsessive thoughts or anxiety, while neuroticism is a personality trait that does not have the same negative impact on everyday living as an anxious condition. In modern non-medical texts, the two are often used with the same meaning, but this is inaccurate.

The term "neurosis" is rarely used by modern psychologists, as they consider it to be outdated and vague.

Characteristics of neurosis

Scientists do not agree on what constitutes neurosis, although there are common traits that have been explored over the centuries.

Emotional instability: According to Hans Jürgen Eysenck (1916-1997), a German-British psychologist, neurosis is defined by emotional instability.

A general affection of the nervous system: Neurosis was first used by Dr. William Kullen, from Scotland, in 1769. He maintained the term refers to "disorders of sense and motion" caused by "a general affection of the nervous system." For Dr. Kullen, this includes coma and epilepsy.

No interference with rational thought or ability to function: More recently, neurosis refers to mental disorders that do not interfere with rational thought or the individual's ability to function, even though they can cause distress.

Caused by an unpleasant experience: According to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), a famous Austrian neurologist who founded the discipline of psychoanalysis, neurosis is a coping strategy caused by unsuccessfully repressed emotions from past experiences.

These emotions overwhelm or interfere with current experience. He gave the example of an overwhelming fear of dogs that may have resulted from a dog-attack earlier in life.

A conflict between two psychic events: Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist who founded analytical psychology. He believed that a neurosis was a clash of conscious and unconscious events in the mind.

These stances on neurosis confirm that it is seen as an ailment, and is normally discussed with an aim to finding the cause of and treating the condition. While a personality test can confirm that a person has neuroticism, it is not a disease or condition and cannot be "treated."

Neuroticism or psychosis?

Psychosis is also different from neuroticism, although some have suggested that it may become a feature of neuroticism.

Psychosis causes a person to perceive or interpret what they see and experience in a different way to those around them. It interferes with their ability to function in a social context.

Symptoms of psychosis include hallucinations and delusions.

Psychosis can be a symptom of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe depression, or a brain tumor.

It can also be triggered by the misuse of some substances, such as alcohol and drugs, whether illegal or prescribed.

In recent years, scientists have questioned the distinction between neurosis and psychosis, as psychosis can develop from neurosis.

In 2002, researchers looking at data for nearly 4,000 people concluded that "neuroticism increases the risk for development of psychotic symptoms."

Types

There are a [few different types](#) of neurosis. Here are some examples.

- **Anxious neurosis**: Extreme anxiety and worry characterize this type of neurosis, as well as [panic attacks](#) and physical symptoms such as tremors and sweating.

- **Depressive neurosis**: This consists of ongoing and profound sadness, often coupled with losing interest in activities that once provided pleasure.

- **Obsessive-compulsive neurosis**: This condition involves repeating intrusive thoughts, behaviors, or mental acts. Both repeating and being deprived of these cues can cause distress.

- **War or combat neurosis**: Now known as [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD), this involves excessive stress and inability to function in everyday life after experiencing deeply traumatic events.

Neurosis was often used to describe diseases in which the nervous system is not functioning correctly, and no lesions show to explain the dysfunction.

Diagnosis

Neurosis is not currently diagnosed by healthcare professionals.

Psychologists and psychiatrists now place symptoms that resemble those in neurosis within the category of depressive disorders or anxiety. However, some psychoanalysts still use the term.

Neuroticism, on the other hand, can be identified and scored by personality tests.

When taking a personality test, an individual can get low, medium, or high scores for neuroticism. People with low scores are more emotionally stable and manage to deal with stress more successfully than those with high scores.

Treatment

Cognitive behavioral therapy may be used to treat neurosis.

Neurosis would be treated with standard psychological care. Conditions that are now diagnosed differently, such as depressive disorder, would have been treated using the same methods as today when neurosis was used an active diagnosis

Treatment can include psychotherapy, psychoactive drugs, and relaxation exercises, such as deep breathing.

Other methods include [cognitive behavioral therapy](#), which adjusts the faulty psychological mechanisms that respond to the environment to react as they should. Creative therapies, such as art therapy or music therapy, have also been used to tackle mental disturbances similar to neuroses.

Takeaway

Psychologists and psychiatrists have been trying to label neuroses for centuries without agreeing on a definition.

Although no longer used, the neuroses diagnosis was an important first step to understanding and treating the psychological disorders of today.

Neuroticism is not a medical problem, and its negative associations are misleading. It is a universal personality trait and is healthy as part of a balanced personality profile.