

Somatoform Disorders

What are Somatoform Disorders?

Somatoform disorders are a category of mental illnesses that cause pain or other symptoms that would suggest a medical condition but where no physical explanation can be found. These symptoms may cause the patient significant distress or impairment in functioning.

Somatoform disorders differ from malingering in which symptoms are intentionally feigned for external gain or factitious disorder in which symptoms are adopted or exaggerated due to an unconscious desire for sympathy or other internal gain. In somatoform disorders, the sufferer perceives the illness as real and they can cause the person to become extremely worried and preoccupied with their physical health. The types of somatoform disorders include Somatization Disorder, Pain Disorder, Hypochondriasis, Body Dysmorphic Disorder and Conversion Disorder.

Symptoms to look for:

- Physical pain with no apparent cause
- Multiple symptoms occurring in different organ systems
- Symptoms affecting motor or sensory function that are preceded by a psychological stressor
- Preoccupation with fears of having a serious illness
- Obsessions over physical imperfections or deformity that may or may not exist

Best Practices

Diagnosing somatoform disorders can be difficult and requires a thorough medical examination and review of medical records to rule out any possible physical cause. Treatment for somatoform disorders should include therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown to be one of the more effective treatments. Ongoing medical treatment is also necessary and psychosocial interventions guided by the physician seem to be most successful. A good relationship between the primary care physician is critical and psychoeducation about how symptoms can be exacerbated by stress and other psychological disturbances can help as well. Regular follow-up visits and ongoing assessments of the patient's condition will help reduce anxiety and limit emergency visits.

Screening Tools/Resources

Screening Tools:

SOMS-7

Resources:

American Academy of Family Physicians

www.familydoctor.org

Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies

www.abct.org

Journal of Biobehavioral Medicine

www.psychosomaticmedicine.org

National Institute of Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov

National Alliance of Mental Illness

www.nami.org



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