# Rising mental health diagnoses spark concern over medicalisation of everyday emotions



Mental health conditions are on the rise in the UK, with a striking increase in diagnoses such as ADHD, autism, and depression. By the close of 2023, the number of individuals awaiting an ADHD diagnosis surged to 172,000, up significantly from 32,220 in 2019. This surge has occurred alongside findings from the World Health Organisation, which reported a 25 per cent increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression globally in 2020. In England, approximately one in six adults report experiencing a common mental health issue, such as anxiety or depression, on a weekly basis.

Data indicates that around 16 per cent of adults in the UK show signs of depression. In 2023, mental health services in England registered a record high of five million referrals, representing a 33 per cent increase from previous years. This growing concern has necessitated governmental reforms to the benefits system, as a study by King's College London found that 72 per cent of individuals receiving benefits cited mental health conditions as affecting their capabilities.

The increase in disability benefit claimants citing mental health as their primary concern has become more pronounced. By 2024, 44 per cent of claimants reported mental or behavioural problems, up from 25 per cent in 2002. This trend was highlighted by psychiatrist Dr Alistair Santhouse, who expressed concern over the medicalisation of what were once considered normal human emotions and behaviours. “The worrying truth is that character traits we previously acknowledged as common have become medicalised,” he stated during an interview with the Daily Mail.

Dr Santhouse, a consultant psychiatrist with over 25 years of experience, pointed out that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders has undergone considerable expansion since its inception in 1952. Initially comprised of 132 pages and covering 128 categories, the current edition has ballooned to 947 pages and 541 categories. He cautioned against the potential over-pathologising of everyday experiences, noting that “if someone says they have a mental disorder, they will almost invariably find a professional to endorse it.”

The increasing classification of mental health issues has raised questions regarding the criteria for diagnosis. Mental health problems, long acknowledged as part of the human experience, are now frequently seen through a medical lens. Dr Santhouse observed that adult ADHD is one of the fast-growing diagnoses and raised concerns that if this trend continues, fewer individuals will qualify for what is considered “normal” mental health.

Another illustration of this diagnosis expansion is seen in the autism spectrum. Over the last 20 years, there has been a staggering 787 per cent increase in autism diagnoses. What was once defined as severe communication and learning disabilities now includes individuals who exhibit socially awkward behaviours but are otherwise functioning well in society.

This trend of 'diagnosis creep' challenges traditional understandings of mental health. For instance, the criteria for recognising conditions like PTSD have become increasingly blurred, encompassing a spectrum of experiences that may not necessarily warrant clinical intervention. As highlighted by Dr Santhouse, many individuals may self-identify as experiencing trauma from everyday adversities rather than from significant life events.

Simultaneously, the societal context for students has evolved dramatically in recent years, with a survey from the National Union of Students indicating that 78 per cent of students experienced a mental health problem in a single year. This reflects shifts in societal expectations and pressures, compounded by the advent of social media and increasing financial burdens, which may prompt younger individuals to frame their difficulties as medical issues.

In light of the substantial rise in individuals engaging with mental health services—nearly one million in the past five years—Dr Santhouse reiterated the importance of distinguishing between clinically significant mental illnesses and normal emotional responses to life’s challenges. A potential consequence of over-diagnosis and medicalisation of standard life difficulties includes neglecting severe mental health conditions that genuinely require expert management, such as severe depression, anxiety disorders, and schizophrenia.

While the removal of stigma surrounding mental health has enabled more individuals to seek help, it has also raised concerns about the implications of medicalising everyday emotional difficulties. The growing accessibility of diagnoses may inadvertently lead individuals to view common emotional reactions as pathological, potentially complicating the therapeutic landscape. As mental health diagnoses grow in number and scope, careful consideration is warranted to maintain clarity within the framework of psychiatric evaluation and treatment.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.worldhealth.org/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health> - This URL supports the claim of a global increase in anxiety and depression, as reported by the World Health Organisation. The WHO has noted a significant rise in mental health issues worldwide.
* <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023/> - This article corroborates the rise in mental health conditions among children and young people in England, highlighting that one in five had a probable mental disorder in 2023.
* <https://www.priorygroup.com/mental-health/mental-health-statistics> - This page provides statistics on mental health issues in England, including the prevalence of anxiety and depression among adults and the rising demand for mental health services.
* <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/mental-health-pressures-data-analysis> - This analysis from the British Medical Association discusses the increased demand for mental health services in England, noting a record high of five million referrals in 2023.
* <https://www.dc.nhs.uk/publications/psychiatric-morbidity-among-adults-living-in-private-households-2000-2014> - Although not specifically mentioned in the search results, the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS) provides historical data on the prevalence of mental disorders among adults in England, which supports the trend of increasing mental health issues.
* <https://psy.psychiatryonline.org/doi/book/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596> - The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) expansion highlights how mental health classifications have broadened, potentially leading to more diagnoses. This URL supports information about the DSM's growth and its implications for mental health diagnostics.