

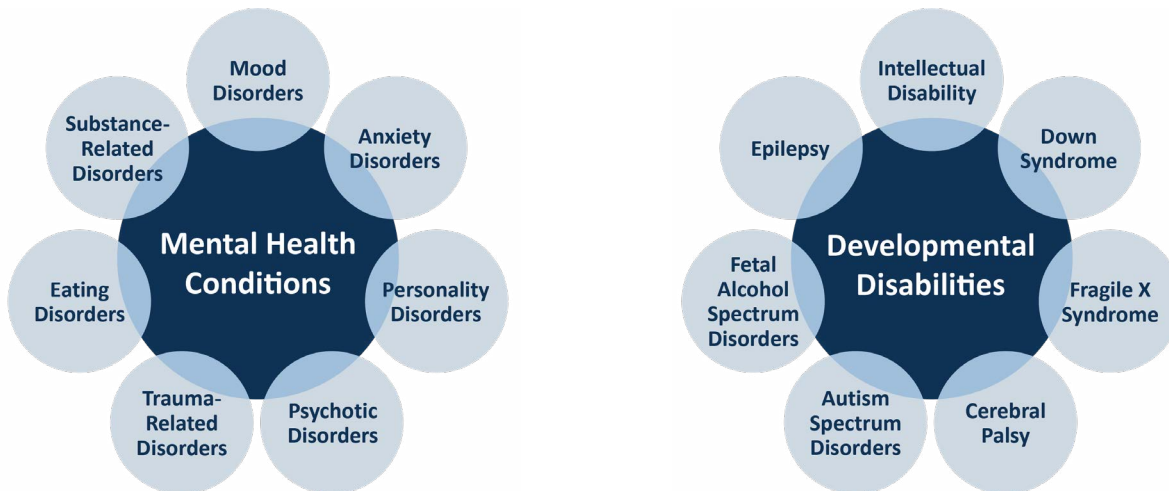
Mental Health Conditions & Developmental Disabilities

Why Know the Difference?

The difference between mental health conditions (also referred to as mental illnesses) and developmental disabilities is often unclear, and it is not uncommon for people to confuse them with one another. In crisis response, it's important to know the difference because people with different types of conditions may require different responses from police officers, including different strategies for communication and referral to different types of resources and supports in the community. Knowing the difference can ensure safer outcomes for all involved.

A mental health condition is defined as a wide range of conditions that can affect mood, thinking, and/or behavior.¹ A developmental disability is defined as a physical and/or mental impairment that begins before age 22, is likely to continue indefinitely, and results in substantial functional limitations in at least three of the following areas: self-care (dressing, bathing, eating, and other daily tasks); walking/moving around; self-direction; independent living; economic self-sufficiency; and language.²

CATEGORIES OF MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES



Common Behaviors/Characteristics

Below are some common characteristics and behaviors that may be observed in people with mental health conditions and people with developmental disabilities. It's important to remember that not all characteristics are found in all people. Some people may experience these while others will not; each person is unique.

Mental Health Conditions

- Has disproportionate feelings of fear or worry
- Feels persistently sad or low
- Has confused thinking
- Experiences persistent irritability or anger
- Avoids friends or social activities
- Has an inability to carry out daily activities
- Experiences excessive mood swings (mania and depression)
- Has substance use disorder
- Has thoughts about suicide
- Has difficulty perceiving reality (delusions, hallucinations)

Developmental Disabilities

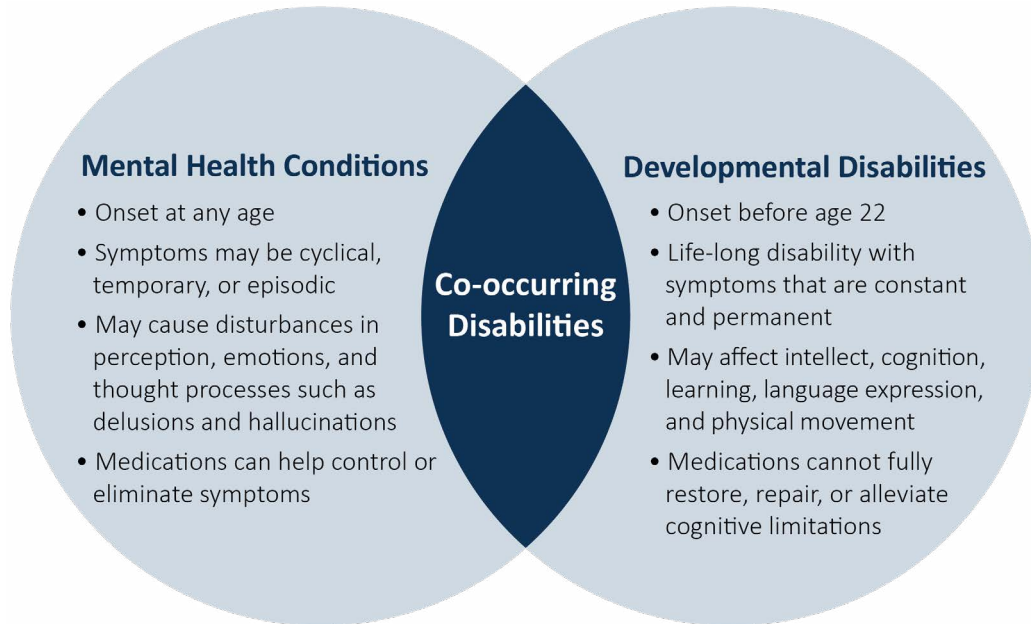
- Is easily influenced/eager to please
- Has difficulty with everyday tasks
- Uses or requests to use assistive devices
- Displays repetitive motion or a motor impairment
- Mimics or repeats speech
- Has limited vocabulary or a speech impairment
- Has difficulty understanding or answering questions
- Has a short attention span
- Displays concrete thinking patterns
- Becomes easily frustrated

¹ "Mental Health Conditions," National Alliance on Mental Illness, accessed July 7, 2021, <https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Mental-Health-Conditions>.

² "Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000," Pub. L. 106-402, 114 Stat. 1683 § 102. https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/about-acl/2016-12/dd_act_2000.pdf

What's the Difference?

While developmental disabilities and mental health conditions have some characteristics in common, they are fundamentally different conditions. It's important to understand their differences, including how they develop and manifest in behaviors. It's also important to know that a person with a developmental disability can have a mental health condition at the same time, which is known as co-occurring conditions. Often, the needs of an individual who has both developmental disabilities and mental health conditions can be overshadowed by a primary diagnosis of a developmental disability. While it may be difficult to differentiate between the two, understanding the difference can lead to more effective communication and appropriate referrals.^{3,4}



Some places offer treatment sites and community-based programs, but such resources are not universally available throughout the United States. Finding appropriate services may require persistence.



Approximately **1 in 3** people with developmental disabilities also have a mental health condition.

While developmental disabilities and mental health conditions are **NOT** the same and require different responses, people **CAN** have both at the same time.

For more information on local mental health resources:

[Find Your Local NAM!](#)

For more information on disability resources, visit:

[NADD'S website](#) or [The Arc's chapter locator](#)

A companion resource, *Developmental Disabilities: What Law Enforcement Officers Need to Know*, focused on law enforcement response to people with developmental disabilities, can be found on the [Academic Training website](#).

3 "Facts About Developmental Disabilities," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed August 24, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/developmentaldisabilities/facts.html>.

4 Amy L. White, "The Relationship between Developmental Disabilities and Mental Health Issues: Online Course," Nursing CE Central, <https://nursingcecentral.com/lessons/the-relationship-between-developmental-disabilities-and-mental-health-issues/>.

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