

Psychological pain

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This article is about non physical pain. For [physical pain](#) caused by psychological factors, see [Psychogenic pain](#).

Psychological pain is an unpleasant feeling (a [suffering](#)) of a psychological, non-physical, origin. A pioneer in the field of suicidology, [Edwin S. Shneidman](#), described it as "how much you hurt as a human being. It is mental suffering; mental torment."^[1] There is no shortage in the many ways psychological pain is referred to, and using a different word usually reflects an emphasis on a particular aspect of mind life. It may be called mental pain,^{[2][3]} emotional pain,^[4] psychic pain,^{[5][6]} social pain,^[7] spiritual or soul pain,^[8] or suffering.^{[9][10]} It is sometimes also called psychalgia.^[11] While these clearly are not equivalent terms, one systematic comparison of theories and models of psychological pain, psychic pain, emotional pain, and suffering concluded that each describe the same profoundly unpleasant feeling.^[12] Psychological pain is believed to be an inescapable aspect of human existence.^[13]

Other descriptions of psychological pain are "a wide range of subjective experiences characterized as an awareness of negative changes in the self and in its functions accompanied by negative feelings",^[14] "a diffuse subjective experience ... differentiated from physical pain which is often localized and associated with noxious physical stimuli",^[15] and "a lasting, unsustainable, and unpleasant feeling resulting from negative appraisal of an inability or deficiency of the self."^[12]

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Etiology [[edit](#)]

The adjective 'psychological' is thought to encompass the functions of beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors,^[16] which may be seen as an indication for the many sources of psychological pain. One way of grouping these different sources of pain was offered by Shneidman, who stated that psychological pain is caused by frustrated psychological needs.^[1] For example, the need for love, autonomy, affiliation, and achievement, or the need to avoid harm, shame, and embarrassment. [Psychological needs](#) were originally described by [Henry Murray](#) in 1938 as needs that motivate human behavior.^[17] Shneidman maintained that people rate the importance of each need differently, which explains why people's level of psychological pain differs when confronted with the same frustrated need. This needs perspective coincides with [Patrick David Wall](#)'s description of physical pain that says that physical pain indicates a need state much more than a sensory experience.^[18]

In the fields of [social psychology](#) and [personality psychology](#), the term social pain is used to denote psychological pain caused by harm or threat to social connection; bereavement, embarrassment, shame and hurt feelings are subtypes of social pain.^[19] Just like physical pain, social pain is thought to serve a

function of adaptation and avoidance from what caused the pain.^[7] From an evolutionary perspective, psychological pain forces the assessment of actual or potential social problems that might reduce the individual's fitness for survival.^[20] The way we display our psychological pain socially (for example, crying, shouting, moaning) serves the purpose of indicating that we are in need.

Neural mechanisms [[edit](#)]

Recent research in neuroscience suggests that physical pain and psychological pain may share some underlying neurological mechanisms.^{[21][22][23]} Brain regions that were consistently found to be implicated in both types of pain are the anterior [cingulate cortex](#) and [prefrontal cortex](#) (some subregions more than others), and may extend to other regions as well. Brain regions that were also found to be involved in psychological pain include the [insular cortex](#), posterior cingulate cortex, [thalamus](#), [parahippocampal gyrus](#), [basal ganglia](#), and [cerebellum](#). Some advocate that, because similar brain regions are involved in both physical pain and psychological pain, we should see pain as a continuum that ranges from purely physical to purely psychological.^[24] Moreover, many sources mention the fact that we use metaphors of physical pain to refer to psychological pain experiences.^{[7][12][25]}

See also [[edit](#)]

- [Psychogenic pain](#)
- [Psychological trauma](#)

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