

Somatic Symptom Disorder

Somatic symptom disorder is a mental health disorder characterized by an extreme focus on physical symptoms, which causes feelings of severe anxiety. While there may or may not be an actual medical condition diagnosed, the anxiety may cause that individual deep emotional distress and could cause problems functioning in everyday life.

Signs & Symptoms

While physical symptoms such as pain, fatigue and shortness of breath are present, the signs of somatic symptom disorder are characterized by how the individual reacts to or feels about their symptoms. Someone with somatic symptom disorder might:

- Be concerned about mild symptoms being a sign of a serious disease
- Not feel reassured after multiple doctor visits and medical tests
- Have severe anxiety over a potential illness
- Think physical sensations are harmful or destructive
- Frequently check their body for any irregularities

Causes & Risk Factors

The exact cause of somatic symptom disorder is unknown, but it is thought to be caused by genetics, family influence, learned behavior of receiving attention for being ill, trouble processing emotions, or consistently having a negative outlook. Risk factors for developing somatic symptom disorder include but are not limited to:

- Having an existing mental illness such as anxiety or depression
- An existing medical condition or recent recovery from one
- Being at risk for developing a medical condition (family history of specific disease)
- Traumatic or stressful life events

Diagnosis & Treatment

A doctor or other mental health professional can diagnose somatic symptom disorder by completing a physical exam, mental health assessment, and any lab tests deemed necessary. Treatment plans may consist of psychotherapy, specifically cognitive behavioral therapy, and medications such as antidepressants. Home remedies such as practicing stress management and relaxation techniques, getting physically active, and refraining from using alcohol and drugs can also help the individual suffering from somatic symptom disorder improve their anxiety and everyday life.

Sources – Mayo Clinic: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/somatic-symptom-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20377776> and American Psychiatric Association: <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/somatic-symptom-disorder/what-is-somatic-symptom-disorder>