CORE CONCEPTS IN ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY

- **The continuum between normal and abnormal behavior.** Emotional and behavioral symptoms occur along a continuum that ranges from mild to severe, and many forms of abnormality are exaggerated versions of normal feelings and behaviors. The dividing line between normal and abnormal is never entirely clear, but the field of abnormal psychology has developed criteria that help us make this distinction.

- **The importance of context in defining and understanding abnormality.** We can only identify a behavior as abnormal if we consider the situational context in which it occurs; behaviors that are normal in one context may be abnormal in another context. Abnormal behavior is usually most understandable when viewed in the context of life history and life events. Finally, demographic context variables such as age, gender, culture, and class influence the definition, classification, explanation and treatment of abnormal behaviors.

- **Cultural and historical influences in defining and classifying abnormality.** Definitions and classifications of abnormal behavior vary considerable across different cultures and historical periods. As a result, we cannot make absolute, universal statements about what constitutes abnormal behavior, and we must always consider the cultural and historical influences on abnormality.

- **The advantages and disadvantages of diagnoses.** Like other scientific fields, abnormal psychology relies on a system of categories for classifying its subject matter. These diagnostic systems are advantageous because they facilitate treatment, research and teaching in abnormal psychology. These systems also have disadvantages: they can oversimplify complex problems and diagnoses can be stigmatizing and demoralizing to the person being diagnosed.

- **The principle of multiple causality.** Mental disorders can result from a variety of causes. The causes can be biological, psychological or sociocultural. Causes can be internal to the person in distress or external/environmental. Most disorders involve multiple, interacting causes. In addition, several different theoretical perspectives co-exist within the field of abnormal psychology. Each theoretical perspective has something important to contribute, and the field of abnormal psychology is increasingly moving towards explanations and treatments that combine components of various theories.

- **The connection between mind and body.** A thorough understanding of psychopathology requires an appreciation of the connection between mind and body. We know that brain abnormalities can cause emotional symptoms, and conversely that emotional distress can cause physical symptoms. As a result, it is important to attend to the interrelations between a person’s psychological and physical functioning in order to diagnose, explain, and treat the whole person.