

PFA Tips

What are “Unspecified” and “Other Specified” Diagnoses?

Getting a diagnosis of a neurological, mental health or learning disorder depends on having a very specific set of symptoms. Sometimes, it’s clear that a child is struggling, but they’re missing just one or two of the symptoms that are necessary for a certain diagnosis. Or a clinician has determined that a child’s challenges fall within a certain group of disorders, but it’s not clear exactly which diagnosis in that group best suits the child. So what does this mean?

Reprinted with permission from *The Child Mind Institute*

“Other Specified” Diagnosis

What is an “Other Specified” diagnosis?

A clinician might give someone an “other specified” diagnosis if they’re missing just one or two of the symptoms that are necessary for a certain diagnosis. For example, a diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) requires that the individual experiences anxiety more days than not. A clinician might see that a person has all the other symptoms of that disorder and that anxiety is interfering with their life, but their anxiety might not show up on enough days to technically count as GAD. In that case, the person could be diagnosed with “Other Specified Anxiety Disorder.” The clinician would add a note to the diagnosis explaining the reason that the diagnosis is not GAD.

Are “other specified” diagnoses less severe?

“Other specified” diagnoses are not necessarily less severe (or more severe) than specific diagnoses. A person with this kind of diagnosis may still experience significant distress, even though their symptoms don’t exactly match a typical diagnosis.

Are “other specified” diagnoses associated with certain ages?

“Other specified” diagnoses are not just for children. Adolescents and adults can

receive them as well. People with “other specified” diagnoses can often get the same kinds of treatment as those who have been diagnosed with specific disorders, and insurance is just as likely to cover that treatment.

Sometimes, an “other specified” diagnosis will be revised later if the child’s symptoms evolve to better match a specific diagnosis. Other times, the “other specified” diagnosis will continue to make sense throughout the child’s treatment.

What are examples of “other specified” diagnoses?

“Other specified” diagnoses that children and adolescents may receive include:

- Other specified anxiety disorder
- Other specified depressive disorder
- Other specified attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Other specified bipolar disorder
- Other specified obsessive-compulsive or related disorder (OCD)
- Other specified feeding or eating disorder
- Other specified tic disorder

“Unspecified” Diagnosis

What is an “Unspecified” diagnosis?

An unspecified diagnosis is used when a clinician has determined that a child’s challenges fall within a certain group of disorders, but it’s not clear exactly which diagnosis in that group best suits the child.



The main difference is that an “unspecified” diagnosis doesn’t include detailed information or the reason that the criteria for a specific diagnosis are not met.

Are “unspecified” diagnoses associated with certain ages?

Unspecified diagnoses are not just for children. Adolescents and adults can receive unspecified diagnoses as well.

Why would a clinician give an “unspecified” diagnoses?

Sometimes clinicians use “unspecified” diagnoses when a person needs care but there’s not time for a full evaluation. This might apply in urgent situations like emergency room visits.

In non-emergency situations, these diagnoses are used when the clinician needs to see how the person’s symptoms develop before making a more specific diagnosis. Especially if the child’s symptoms started recently or if they are relatively mild, it can take time to understand exactly what the child is experiencing and how their symptoms affect their life. Waiting to make a more specific diagnosis also lets the

continued on back



clinician gather more information about the various factors that might affect the child's symptoms — such as substance use, medical conditions, or environmental factors like stress at home.

Often, a clinician will make an unspecified diagnosis with the goal of making a more specific diagnosis later. However, unspecified diagnoses can also be helpful for kids who are clearly struggling but who don't exactly meet the criteria for a more specific disorder, even after some time has passed.

Are “unspecified” diagnoses treated differently?

Individuals with “unspecified” disorder diagnoses can often get the same kinds of treatment as those who have been diagnosed with specific disorders, and insurance is just as likely to cover that treatment.

What are examples of “unspecified” diagnoses?

“Unspecified” disorders that individuals can be diagnosed with include:

- Unspecified anxiety disorder
- Unspecified depressive disorder
- Unspecified behavior disorder
- Unspecified attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Unspecified bipolar disorder
- Unspecified obsessive-compulsive or related disorder (OCD)
- Unspecified feeding or eating disorder
- Unspecified tic disorder

What are “NOS” diagnoses?

You might also see diagnoses that use the term “NOS,” which stands for “not otherwise specified.” This terminology comes from a previous version of the DSM, the manual that clinicians use to make diagnoses. NOS diagnoses were officially discontinued with the publication of the DSM-5 in 2013, but some clinicians may still use them. NOS diagnoses work the same way as “unspecified” diagnoses in practice.

Additional Resources

Pathfinders for Autism Online Provider Database
<http://pathfindersforautism.org/providers-services/>
 Choose category > Getting Diagnosed

PFA Tips: What to Expect at an Autism Evaluation
<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/newly-diagnosed/autism-evaluation/>

The Child Mind Institute Family Resource Center
childmind.org/resources

Reprinted with permission from The
 Child Mind Institute
childmind.org

© 2022 Pathfinders for Autism