

A Simple Expository Essay¹

Explain the chief differences between neurosis and psychosis.

The chief differences between neurosis and psychosis are the extent to which a person is alienated from reality and can make a workable adjustment to normal living. The neurotic person can still effectively function in the world, while the psychotic person cannot.

A person suffering from neurosis may feel serious anxieties but still be able to handle the ordinary activities of daily living. For example, a woman may have a phobia about being left alone with a red-headed man because a male with red hair once assaulted her. Yet, as long as she avoids that particular situation, she is able to conduct her domestic and business duties in a normal manner. Through psychiatric counseling she may learn to understand the cause of her phobia and either get rid of it or control it. Fears of heights and crowds are other examples of neuroses. They are not central to the way one organizes his or her life, and they can be alleviated either by counseling or by avoidance of situations in which the neurotic response is likely to occur. Thus, while neuroses may limit a person's range of behaviours, they do not render a person totally incapable of acting and functioning in everyday society.

A psychotic person, on the other hand, is so divorced from reality that in severe cases, like paranoid schizophrenia, he or she lives in a private world which has little relation to the real one. A man who thinks he is Moses, and feels a divinely granted right to punish those who break any of the Ten Commandments, has reorganized experience around a delusion that makes life bearable for him. His delusion is necessary to his continued existence. In a sense he has found a therapy that works for him. He will resist psychiatric help because he thinks he no longer has any problem: it is the sinners who have problems. Unfortunately, these delusions make it very difficult for a psychotic person to navigate the realities of everyday life. The delusions rarely integrate properly with the physical and cultural norms of the surrounding world. Given that the delusion is often a reaction *against* the surrounding world, this is hardly surprising. Such a person may be helped to some degree by specialized, institutional care, but the chances of a complete recovery are slim. His or her alienation from the rest of the world is much more comprehensive than a neurotic's, and social integration is unlikely.

On the whole, neurosis and psychosis differ mainly in the degree to which they create psychic distress and allow individuals to function with other people. Neurosis, which is characterized by fear of specific situations and behaviours, can be isolated and often treated. Psychosis, which is defined by its intense and far-reaching delusions, is highly debilitating. Both are psychological conditions that deviate from normal psychological and social functioning, but their differences in severity show that mental illness is defined on a spectrum rather than in absolute terms.

¹. Adapted from James McCrimmon, Writing With A Purpose, 7th Ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), pp. 263-264.