



Review

Defining and measuring irritability: Construct clarification and differentiation

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Irritability is defined and measured inconsistently in scholarly literature.
- We review and analyze scholarly definitions and measures of irritability.
- There is much overlap among the constructs of irritability, anger, and aggression.
- Themes of irritability were divided into causes, experience, and consequences.
- We propose a definition of irritability and recommend items for measurement.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 October 2015

Received in revised form 23 December 2016

Accepted 30 January 2017

Available online 1 February 2017

Keywords:

Irritability

Anger

Aggression

Definition

Assessment

ABSTRACT

Irritability is a symptom of 15 disorders in the DSM-5 and is included in Mood Disorders, Addictive Disorders, Personality Disorders, and more (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, the term *irritability* is defined and measured inconsistently in the scholarly literature. In this article, we reviewed the scholarly definitions of irritability and the item content of irritability measures. Components of definitions and items measuring irritability were divided into three categories: a) causes, b) experience, and c) consequences. We also reviewed potential causes and biomarkers of irritability. We found much overlap between definitions and measures of irritability and related constructs such as anger and aggression. Consequently, the validity of research on irritability needs to be questioned including the role of irritability in psychopathology and the presence of irritability as a symptom in any disorder. Research on irritability's role in behavioral disorders needs to be repeated after more well defined measures are developed. We proposed a more precise definition of irritability that clearly differentiates it from related constructs. Suggested items for measuring irritability are also provided.

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1. Introduction

Irritability is one of the most transdiagnostic constructs in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5), ranging across 15 disorders including Mood Disorders; Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders; Disruptive, Impulse-Control, and Conduct Disorders; Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders; and Personality Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Although irritability is one of the precursors for anger and aggression (Craig, Hietanen, Markova, & Berrios, 2008; DiGiuseppe & Tafrate, 2007; Ekman, 2007; Holtzman, O'Connor, Barata, & Stewart, 2015; Kassino & Tafrate, 2002), considerable confusion has existed in distinguishing irritability from anger, aggression, and other related constructs among the public, researchers, practitioners, and theoreticians (DiGiuseppe & Tafrate, 2007; Holtzman et al., 2015).

This overlap in the conceptualizations of irritability, anger, and aggression is apparent in the DSM-5. A list of the disorders that include irritability, anger, and aggression as a symptom appears in Table 1. It is not immediately clear what distinguishes anger from irritability. Also, the

DSM-5 often provides descriptive qualifiers to specify the nature of constructs; however, these qualifiers add further conceptual confusion. For example, the terms *irritable mood*, *irritability*, *mood [that] can be irritable*, *unexplained irritability*, and *irritable behavior* represent the various ways irritability is described across DSM-5 disorders. It is unclear what discriminates *unexplained irritability* from *irritability*, or *irritability* from *irritable mood* or *irritable behavior*. Further, it is unclear what discriminates *irritable mood* from *anger*, or *irritable behavior* from *aggression* or *angry behavior*. Researchers and clinicians will find it difficult to make diagnostic judgments and treatment decisions given this lack of clarity.

Our goal is to enhance the diagnostic accuracy and treatment efficacy of disorders related to irritability, anger, and aggression by forming clearer, more precise conceptualizations of each of these constructs. Once these conceptualizations are clarified, the field can progress to examine how the constructs are related to any given psychiatric disorder.

Some literature exists addressing the role of irritability in the context of psychopathology throughout the lifespan. Irritability has been detected as early as infancy (Keefe & Froese-Fretz, 1991; Keefe, Kotzer, Froese-Fretz, & Curtin, 1996; Snaith & Taylor, 1985), and is potentially

Table 1
Disorders with symptoms of irritability, anger, and aggression in the DSM-5.

Irritability	Anger	Aggression
Generalized Anxiety Disorder: "irritability" (p. 122)	Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder: "persistently... angry" (p. 156)	Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder: "physical aggression" (p. 156)
Bipolar Disorder I and II: "irritable mood" (p. 124–125; p. 132–133)	Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder: "anger" (p. 177)	Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: "verbal or physical aggression" (p. 272)
Cyclothymic Disorder: "irritable mood" (p. 139)	Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: "angry outbursts (with little or no provocation)" (p. 272)	Acute Stress Disorder: "verbal or physical aggression" (p. 281)
Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder: "persistently irritable" (p. 156)	Acute Stress Disorder: "angry outbursts (with little or no provocation)" (p. 281)	Intermittent Explosive Disorder: "verbal or physical aggression" (p. 466)
Major Depressive Disorder: "irritable mood" (p. 160)	Oppositional Defiant Disorder: "angry mood" (p. 462)	Conduct Disorder: "aggression" (p. 469)
Persistent Depressive Disorder: "mood can be irritable" (p. 168)	Cannabis Withdrawal: "anger" (p. 518)	Alcohol Intoxication: "aggressive behavior" (p. 497)
Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder: "marked irritability" (p. 172)	Stimulant Intoxication: "anger" (p. 567)	Cannabis Withdrawal: "aggression" (p. 518)
Reactive Attachment Disorder: "unexplained irritability" (p. 265)	Tobacco Withdrawal: "frustration or anger" (p. 575)	Inhalant Intoxication: "assaultiveness" (p. 538)
Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: "irritable behavior" (p. 273)	Paranoid Personality Disorder: "react angrily" (p. 649)	Sedative, Hypnotic, or Anxiolytic Intoxication: "aggressive behavior" (p. 550)
Acute Stress Disorder: "irritable behavior" (p. 281)	Borderline Personality Disorder: "anger" (p. 663)	Antisocial Personality Disorder: "aggressiveness" (p. 659)
Oppositional Defiant Disorder: "irritable mood" (p. 461)		
Cannabis Withdrawal: "irritability" (p. 506)		
Tobacco Withdrawal: "irritability" (p. 518)		
Antisocial Personality Disorder: "irritability" (p. 659)		
Borderline Personality Disorder: "irritability" (p. 663)		

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