



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

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A Critical Examination of Recurrent Depressive Disorder (6A71) in the ICD-11 Framework

Component 2: Written Assignment (Report)

Student name: Princess Njimogun

Student number: 2235075

Lecturer: Dr Bianca Sanfilippo & Dr Farah Wiita

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1. Introduction

Recurrent Depressive Disorder (RDD), classified as 6A71 in the International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision (ICD-11), is widely recognised as one of the most common and disabling mental health conditions worldwide. The disorder is generally characterised by repeated episodes of depressed mood, reduced interest or pleasure in activities, and a decline in everyday functioning. These episodes can affect a person's ability to work, maintain relationships, and participate in daily life.

Research suggests that individuals who experience one depressive episode may have a higher risk of experiencing further episodes in the future. Because of this recurring pattern, recurrent depression often presents greater challenges for long-term treatment and recovery compared with a single episode (Monroe and Harkness, 2022).

In addition to its high prevalence, recurrent depression is associated with significant social and economic consequences. Individuals experiencing repeated depressive episodes may find it difficult to maintain employment, sustain relationships, or participate fully in society. These difficulties may lead to reduced quality of life and increased reliance on healthcare services. According to global health research, depression remains one of the leading contributors to disability worldwide (WHO, 2022).

Repeated depressive episodes may also increase an individual's vulnerability to stress. Some researchers suggest that each episode may lower the threshold required for another episode to occur. This process, sometimes referred to as a "kindling effect", suggests that relatively minor stressors may eventually trigger further episodes of depression (Monroe and Harkness, 2022).

This report critically examines the classification of Recurrent Depressive Disorder within the ICD-11 framework. It explores how the disorder is diagnosed and described, and it evaluates the effectiveness of current treatment and rehabilitation approaches. The report also discusses contemporary debates surrounding depression, including the role of neurodivergence and trauma-informed perspectives. Finally, recommendations are proposed that may help improve future clinical practice and mental health policy.

2. Classification and Diagnosis

Within ICD-11, Recurrent Depressive Disorder is classified under Chapter 6: Mental, Behavioural or Neurodevelopmental Disorders, specifically within the category of Mood Disorders (World Health Organization, 2022). The classification describes the disorder as involving at least two depressive episodes separated by a period of recovery lasting several months. Importantly, individuals diagnosed with recurrent depression must not have experienced manic or hypomanic episodes, as this would suggest bipolar disorder.

A significant development within ICD-11 is the introduction of the Clinical Descriptions and Diagnostic Requirements (CDDR) approach. This model was designed to improve clinical utility by allowing clinicians to apply professional judgement rather than relying strictly on rigid symptom checklists (Reed et al., 2019). This flexibility may enable clinicians to recognise the diversity in how depression is experienced across different individuals and cultural contexts.

To diagnose a depressive episode, symptoms must typically persist for at least two weeks and be present most of the day, nearly every day. Common symptoms include persistent sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, fatigue, changes in sleep or appetite, difficulty concentrating, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, and thoughts of death or suicide (WHO, 2022). In addition to symptom presence, the symptoms must lead to significant distress or impairment in important areas of life such as social relationships, work, or education.

In practice, diagnosing recurrent depressive disorder usually involves a comprehensive clinical assessment conducted by a mental health professional. This may include structured interviews, psychological questionnaires, and discussion of the individual's personal history. Clinicians aim to understand the duration and severity of symptoms, the timing of previous episodes, and possible triggers such as stressful life events.

Differential diagnosis is also an important part of the process. Conditions such as bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, or certain medical conditions may present with similar symptoms. Careful assessment is therefore required to ensure the correct diagnosis is made.

Cultural context may also influence how depressive symptoms are expressed. In some cultures, emotional distress may be communicated through physical symptoms such as fatigue or bodily pain. Clinicians must therefore consider social and cultural factors when interpreting symptoms and determining whether diagnostic criteria are met.

Although the two-week duration requirement is widely accepted, some researchers argue that it may be somewhat arbitrary. Short-term reactions to stressful life events could sometimes meet diagnostic criteria even when they represent understandable emotional responses. ICD-11 therefore encourages clinicians to consider the “boundary with normality” and to distinguish between normal sadness and clinical depression (First et al., 2021).

3. Treatment and Rehabilitation

Treatment for Recurrent Depressive Disorder often involves a combination of psychological therapy and pharmacological intervention. Clinical guidelines such as those provided by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommend a stepped-care approach, where treatment intensity increases depending on the severity and persistence of symptoms (NICE, 2022).

Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) are among the most commonly prescribed medications for depression. These drugs are generally preferred due to their relatively favourable safety profile compared with older antidepressants. They work by increasing serotonin availability in the brain, which may help regulate mood.

However, the long-term effectiveness of antidepressants remains debated. Some studies suggest that antidepressants are particularly beneficial for moderate to severe depression, while their effectiveness for milder forms may be less clear (Hengartner, 2019). In addition, withdrawal symptoms may occur when medication is discontinued, which can complicate treatment for some individuals (Horowitz and Taylor, 2019).

Psychological therapies are also central to treatment. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is widely used and focuses on helping individuals identify and challenge negative patterns of thinking that contribute to depressive symptoms. By learning new coping strategies, individuals may become better able to manage stress and prevent relapse.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) has also shown promise in preventing recurrence. This approach combines cognitive therapy techniques with mindfulness practices, helping individuals observe negative thoughts without becoming overwhelmed by them (Kuyken et al., 2016).

Rehabilitation strategies focus on helping individuals regain everyday functioning and rebuild meaningful life roles. Occupational support programmes may help individuals return to work gradually after a depressive episode. Community initiatives such as social prescribing may connect individuals with activities including exercise groups, volunteering, or creative programmes, which may improve social connection and wellbeing (Cunningham et al., 2021).

Rehabilitation also involves rebuilding daily routines and social networks. Depression often leads to social withdrawal, which can increase feelings of isolation. Community support groups, physical activity programmes, and peer support initiatives may help individuals reconnect with others and rebuild confidence.

Despite these treatments, outcomes can vary. A significant proportion of individuals experience treatment-resistant depression, where symptoms persist despite multiple interventions. This highlights the importance of considering broader social factors such as unemployment, poverty, and housing instability, which may contribute to ongoing distress (Compton and Shim, 2020).

4. Current Debates and Emerging Issues

Several debates have emerged in recent years regarding how depression should be understood and treated. One important discussion concerns the relationship between depression and neurodivergence. Some researchers suggest that a proportion of adults diagnosed with recurrent depression may actually be undiagnosed autistic individuals experiencing chronic stress or “autistic burnout” (Belcher et al., 2022).

In such cases, depressive symptoms may result from prolonged pressure to conform to social expectations. If clinicians focus only on treating depressive symptoms, the underlying neurodevelopmental differences may remain unrecognised.

Another important debate involves trauma-informed perspectives. Traditional biomedical models often focus on biological causes or internal symptoms. However, alternative frameworks such as the Power Threat Meaning Framework propose that emotional distress may often be a response to adverse life experiences or social inequalities (Johnstone and Boyle, 2018).

This perspective encourages professionals to ask not only “What is wrong with you?” but also “What has happened to you?”. Trauma-informed care therefore emphasises the role of life experiences such as abuse, discrimination, or poverty in shaping mental health outcomes.

A related debate concerns the medicalisation of everyday emotional experiences. Some scholars argue that diagnostic systems may sometimes classify normal emotional reactions to stressful events as mental disorders. Others argue that classification systems remain important because they allow individuals to access treatment and support.

These debates highlight the complexity of mental health classification and suggest that both biological and social perspectives may be necessary for a complete understanding of depression (Kinderman, 2019).

5. Recommendations

Several improvements could help strengthen the diagnosis and treatment of recurrent depression. First, diagnostic assessments could include broader screening for neurodevelopmental conditions and adverse childhood experiences. Identifying these factors early may allow clinicians to develop more personalised treatment plans.

Second, mental health services may benefit from increased emphasis on social recovery approaches. Support for employment, housing stability, and community participation may play an important role in preventing relapse.

Third, greater public awareness of depression may help reduce stigma and encourage individuals to seek help earlier. Educational campaigns may improve understanding of mental health and promote supportive attitudes within communities.

Finally, future research may further explore the role of lifestyle interventions such as physical activity, nutrition, and sleep in supporting mental wellbeing. Emerging research suggests these factors may play an important role in preventing recurrence (Sarris et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

Recurrent Depressive Disorder represents a major global mental health challenge. The ICD-11 classification provides an important framework for diagnosing the disorder and guiding treatment decisions. However, the complexity of depression means that classification systems cannot fully capture the wide range of experiences associated with the condition.

Although medications and psychological therapies can be effective for many individuals, relapse remains common. This suggests that broader social, psychological, and environmental factors may also contribute to long-term mental health outcomes.

Recent debates surrounding neurodivergence, trauma, and social determinants of mental health highlight the need for more holistic approaches to treatment. Integrating medical care with social support and community resources may improve recovery and reduce the likelihood of recurrence.

Overall, improving understanding of recurrent depression requires ongoing research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and greater attention to the social contexts in which mental health difficulties occur.

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