

SYMPTOMS Signs and Symbolism in Medical Discourse

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SYMPTOMS Signs and Symbolism in Medical Discourse

Whether it is regarded as disease or illness, whether it occurs in a society practicing biomedicine or a culture practicing indigenous medicine, sickness is universal. Diseases and illnesses of all types plague each and every society throughout the world. Central to the idea of [sickness](#) is the [diagnostic](#) element of the symptom. Although many cultures have unique ideologies regarding sickness, healing, and efficacy, these cultures use the symptom as the primary instrument to maintain their culturally constructed idea of health. Regardless of the healing system or society, globally, people tend to use the symptom as a tool to communicate illness to the appropriate medical [practitioner](#). In seeking the healing action of practitioners and the advice of friends and family, the sick communicate their symptoms as a way of receiving social legitimization for their illness. Thus, symptoms are also used by the sick to gain legitimization of the sick role from society.

Just as culture is integrated in the beliefs and behaviors of every society, symptoms are deeply embedded in the concept of sickness and healing. Symptoms add clarity to the

complex ideas of sickness and healing in such a way that it is difficult to discuss either process without touching on these symbols. The symptom is regarded as a vital part of the illness experience because it offers insight into the physiological and psychological aspects of the patient's body. In this way, the symptom symbolizes the roots of a tree, anchoring a societal understanding of medical knowledge and healing etiologies. Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to explore the significance of symptoms and determine their centrality to a culture's ideas of sickness and healing. Related topics such as the symptom's significance in the process of social legitimization of illness and its symbolic nature will serve to supplement and support the argument that symptoms are, in fact, central in the process of healing.

Definition and Importance of the Symptom

Due to the intricacy of the symptom, it is difficult to construct a simple definition. Illness symptoms are "differently labeled by individuals in dissimilar social situations" (Browner 1983: 494).

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