

Take a Mental Health Day in Russian

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

November 01, 2019



Igor Ivanko / Moskva News Agency

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Психика: psyche, mental health

Translation is strange. You think it's going to be easy because you've got a great big pile of cognates and borrowed words, all of which sound exactly the same in Russian and English. But when you start translating, it turns out that they don't quite match up the way you expect them to.

This particular revelation came out of a simple — or so I thought — question: How do you talk about mental health in Russian?

Now in today's American English, "mental health" is a big linguistic trunk that you can fill with almost anything you want. Mental health refers to emotional, psychological, biochemical, and social well-being. It can be found in the name of health ministry departments, or used as a polite euphemism, or even made fun of. People talk about it — a lot.

In Russia and in Russian, people don't really talk about mental health as much as or in the same way as Americans do. If you are looking for a neutral, polite, semi-formal phrase, you start with the noun *психика* or adjective *психический*, which sound like "psychic" but don't mean clairvoyant. Flashback to Ancient Greek 101: They mean the human psyche in the sense of the human soul or spirit. So the Russian version of mental health is "health of the human psyche": *психическое здоровье*. This could also be *психическое состояние* (mental state) or sometimes the rather dated term *душевное здоровье* (literally "health of the soul"). This sounds a bit odd to our modern ear, but psyche means soul, so it's just another way of talking about the state of a person's inner being.

When you get formal and are talking about departments of ministries or local health boards, you might use *центр психического здоровья* (center for mental health) or even *центр здравоохранения и психической гигиены* (center for health and mental hygiene), which, with the sound association with *hyena* (*гиена*) in both English and Russian, is totally unacceptable and will be banned once I'm in charge of world-wide language rules.

Informally, if you were chatting with someone about, say, the mental health status of a mutual friend's new significant other, roommate, or colleague, you'd probably just use the word *психика* with an adjective. *У неё совершенно нормальная психика.* (She's completely normal.) *У него уравновешенная психика* (He's well-adjusted; there's nothing wrong with the guy.)

When I queried some Russian friends on how to say "I'm going to take a mental health day" in Russian, they first wanted to know what on earth that meant. I explained that it was a bit a joke but meant, essentially: *Возьму отгул, а то я взорвусь.* (I'm going to take a day off or else I'll explode.) They said: *Ну, так и скажи* (Well, that's what you'd say).

That was easy.

But when you talk about mental health facilities and providers, things get complicated. In English these centers can offer everything from in-house psychiatric care to psychological counseling or even addiction support groups led by a volunteer. Mental health providers run the gamut from psychiatrists (medical doctors) to psychotherapists (with degrees in psychological counseling) to a licensed practitioner, counselor, social worker or even coach.

In Russian you have to be specific (concretization). If it's a psychiatric care facility, you can call it *психиатрический стационар* (live-in psychiatric care unit); *психбольница* (psychiatric care hospital); *психиатрическая лечебница* (psychiatric care unit); or *психиатрическая клиника* (psychiatric clinic). If it is a place that offers counseling, it might be called *центр психологической помощи* (center for psychological counseling/aid); *центр психологического консультирования* (psychological counseling center) or *центр психотерапии* (center for psychological therapy). If an organization offers urgent help, it's usually called *центр* or *служба экстренной психологической помощи* (emergency psychological aid center/service). If it's a call service — *горячая линия* (hotline) or *телефон*

доверия (helpline; crisis counseling line; crisis hotline). Psychiatrists are психиатры and psychologists are психологи.

You find the same difference between inclusive and specific with the phrase mental health problem — психическое расстройство (literally “mental disorder”) — which in English might mean a bio-chemical imbalance that requires medication. But it might also be a teenager’s depression over a best friend moving away. In Russian these might be психологические or душевные проблемы (psychological problems) on the one hand or психиатрические болезни or заболевания (psychiatric disorders) on the other.

Psychology was translated into Russian by the great lexicographer Vladimir Dal as душесловие. I can’t find too many examples of that word, but the adjective душевнобольной (“soul sick”) for someone who is mentally ill was the common term and is still sometimes used today. Они познакомили меня с душевнобольным стариком, страдающим манией преследования (They introduced me to a mentally ill old man who suffered from a persecution complex.)

Although you see how the words психика (psyche) and психология (psychology) and related adjectives are used in translations from the English, it’s worth taking a minute to understand how they are used in discussions of people in Russian. Психика (psyche) is the all-encompassing Russian word that refers to a person’s emotional and psychological state and capabilities. Опасаясь за ранимую детскую психику, рекомендую всячески обходить стороной тему смерти (Wary of a child’s easily traumatized psyche, I recommend doing all you can to avoid the subject of death.)

In reference to a person, психология (psychology) often means mentality or way of thinking and behaving. You often hear about психология женщин, мужчин, северян, русских, европейцев (the mentality of women, men, northerners, Russians, Europeans). Система построения общества на понятии “не выделяйся” сформировала в населении рабскую психологию (The societal system based on the concept “don’t stand out” has formed a slave mentality in the population.)

When something is off with someone’s психика or психология, the standard word for insane is сумасшедший (crazy, a word that took me about 25 years to learn how to spell correctly). Сумасшедший can be good — Ты купил мне 100 роз?! Ты сумасшедший! (You bought me 100 roses? You’re crazy!) — or bad — Ты потратил последние деньги на 100 роз?! Ты сумасшедший! (You spent your last money on 100 roses? Are you out of your mind?!)

Безумный (insane, literally “without mind”) is generally used expressively rather than clinically: Какой безумный день! (What a crazy day!)

Colloquially, people describe mental disorders as тараканы (literally “cockroaches”) as in: У всех свои тараканы в голове (Everyone has issues.) Someone who is a little off emotionally or psychologically might be человек с приветом (someone who is slightly kooky, literally “a person passing on hello” — a phrase no one can figure out the origin of); чокнутый (nutty); тронутый (touched); странноватый (a bit strange). Ненормальный (not normal) covers everything from “having some oddities” to “completely crazy call the authorities.”

The most extreme forms of psychological disorders — and the most insulting words — are based on the word психика: псих (psycho); психопат (psychopath). Useful to know; bad to use.

And now I definitely need a mental health day.

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