Mind
Reading

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Description

The *Mind Reading* information handout forms part of the cognitive distortions series, designed to help clients and therapists to work more effectively with common thinking biases.

A brief introduction to cognitive distortions

Cognitive distortions, cognitive biases, or 'unhelpful thinking styles' are the characteristic ways our thoughts become biased (Beck, 1963). We are always interpreting the world around us, trying to make sense of what is happening. Sometimes our brains take 'shortcuts' and we think things that are not completely accurate. Different cognitive short cuts result in different kinds of bias or distortions in our thinking. Sometimes we might jump to the worst possible conclusion ("this rough patch of skin is cancer!"), at other times we might blame ourselves for things that are not our fault ("If I hadn't made him mad he wouldn't have hit me"), and at other times we might rely on intuition and jump to conclusions ("I know that they all hate me even though they're being nice"). These biases are often maintained by characteristic unhelpful assumptions (Beck et al., 1979).

Different cognitive biases are associated with different clinical presentations. For example, catastrophizing is associated with anxiety disorders (Nöel et al., 2012), dichotomous thinking has been linked to emotional instability (Veen & Arntz, 2000), and thought-action fusion is associated with obsessive compulsive disorder (Shafran et al., 1996).

Catching automatic thoughts and (re)appraising them is a core component of traditional cognitive therapy (Beck et al., 1979; Beck, 1995; Kennerley, Kirk, Westbrook, 2007). Identifying the presence and nature of cognitive biases is often a helpful way of introducing this concept – clients are usually quick to appreciate and identify with the concept of 'unhelpful thinking styles', and can easily be trained to notice the presence of biases in their own automatic thoughts. Once biases have been identified, clients can be taught to appraise the accuracy of these automatic thoughts and draw new conclusions.

Mind Reading

Human beings are social animals, so understanding the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of other people is important. In fact, it can be a matter of survival. Unsurprisingly, then, humans are skilled at deducing what might be going on in the minds of others, often on the basis of their observable behavior. Psychologists call this 'mind perception', and despite it being based on observation and guesswork, it's often accurate (Zaki & Ochsner, 2011).

Unfortunately, mind perception can also go wrong. 'Mind reading' is a cognitive distortion that describes inaccurate mind perception, and is a form of arbitrary interpretation (Beck, 1963): "forming an interpretation of a situation, event, or experience when there is no factual evidence to support the conclusion, or when the conclusion is contrary to the evidence". Specifically, the form of arbitrary interpretation concerns the contents of other people's minds. Burns (1981) defines mind reading as a form of 'jumping to conclusions' (the other being 'fortune telling'):

"You make the assumption that other people are looking down on you, and you're so convinced about this that you don't even bother to check it out. Suppose you are giving an excellent lecture, and you notice that a man in the front row is nodding off. He was up most of the night in a wild fling, but you of course don't know this. You might have the thought, "This audience thinks I'm a bore". Suppose a friend passes you on the street and fails to say hello because he is so absorbed in his thoughts he doesn't notice you. You might erroneously conclude, "He is ignoring me so he must not like me anymore". Perhaps your spouse is unresponsive one evening because he or she was criticized at work and is too upset to want to talk about it. Your heart sinks because of the way you interpret the silence: "He (or she) is mad at me. What did I do wrong?" You may then respond to these imagined negative reactions with withdrawal or counterattack. This self-defeating behaviour pattern may act as a self-fulfilling prophecy and set up a negative interaction in a relationship when none exists in the first place."

Description

Examples of mind reading include:

- Thinking that other people are making negative judgments about oneself (e.g., "She thinks I'm an idiot", "He thinks I'm going to steal from his shop").

- Assuming that other people have hostile intentions (e.g., "He wants to make me feel uncomfortable").

- Making predictions about what others feel ("She's mad because I haven't paid her much attention").

People who habitually mind-read may have 'blind spots' when it comes to:

- Accurately appraising what other people think.

- Knowing how they are truly perceived by others.

- Judging the intentions of others.

While misinferring the contents of other people's minds can lead to distress, an inability to track other people's thoughts can also be problematic (what has been referred to as 'theory of mind'). For example, autistic individuals may struggle to connect with other people's interests, viewpoints, and communicative intentions, resulting in social difficulties (Happe, 2015). Impaired mind-reading has also been reported amongst people given a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder (e.g., Colle et al., 2019).

As with many cognitive biases, there may be evolutionary reasons why people mind-read.

Gilbert (1998) suggests that jumping to conclusions is a typical of 'better safe than sorry' thinking, which arises in circumstances where failure to avoid a threat has significant costs (e.g., rejection). Similarly, Dudley and Over (2003) propose that people respond to potential threats with 'threat-confirmatory reasoning': "a 'quick and dirty' risk assessment in … an immediate emergency situation" (Schlier, 2015). Indeed, research suggests that jumping to conclusions increases alongside anxiety .

Mind reading (and jumping to conclusions more generally) is associated with a wide range of difficulties, including:

- Anxiety (Schwartz & Maric, 2014 ; Maric et al., 2011).

- Body dysmorphia (Buhlmann et al., 2015; Wilhelm, 2020).

- Borderline personality disorder (Schilling et al., 2012).

- Depression (Blake et al., 2016).

- Delusions (So et al., 2016).

- Relationship problems (Hamamci, 2002).

- Social anxiety (Buhlmann et al., 2015; Ranta et al., 2016; Hezel & McNally, 2014).

- Suicidal behaviors (Beck et al., 2004; Jager-Hyman et al., 2014).

Instructions

Clinicians might begin by providing psychoeducation about mind reading and automatic thoughts more generally. Consider sharing some of these important details:

- Automatic thoughts spring up spontaneously in our minds, usually in the form of words or images.

- They are often on the 'sidelines' of our awareness. With practice, we can become more aware of them. It is a bit like a theatre – we can bring our automatic thoughts 'center stage'.

- Automatic thoughts are not always accurate: just because you think something, it doesn't make it true.

- Automatic thoughts are often inaccurate in characteristic ways. One common type of bias in automatic thoughts is 'mind reading': we sometimes assume we know what other people are thinking when we actually don't.

- Signs that mind reading thoughts are present include feeling judged or embarrassed, or believing that others are thinking negatively of us.

- In some circumstances, it can be helpful to guess what other people are thinking, feeling, and intending to do. Psychologists call this 'mind perception'. It is clear that being able to do this would have helped our ancestors survive and thrive in groups.

- It can be good to make quick decisions in threatening or uncertain situations. One example is making quick judgments, such as "is this thing dangerous or safe?". One reason why we mind-read is because it helps simplify situations so we can make snap judgments. For example, if we are quick to decide someone has bad intentions, we will keep our distance. This could be costly, but it might also keep us safe.

Many treatment techniques can be used to address mind reading:

- **Decentering.** Meta-cognitive awareness, or decentering, describes the ability to stand back and view a thought as a cognitive event: as an opinion, and not necessarily a fact (Flavell, 1979). Help clients to practice labeling the process present in the thinking rather than engaging with the content. For instance, they might say to themselves, "I'm mind reading again", whenever they notice these thoughts.

- **Cognitive restructuring with thought records.** Self-monitoring can be used to capture and re-evaluate mind-reading thoughts as they arise. Useful prompts include:

- **Testing deliberate mind-reading.** Test whether the client can accurately mind-read. Think of a number between 1 and 100 and see if the client can guess it (and discuss why they can't). Make sure to note in advance that you will be repeating the test (lucky guesses do happen!).

- **Surveys.** Use surveys to test how accurate the client's mind reading thoughts are (e.g., "Do other people judge my body in the way I think they do?"), or collect data about how other people interpret interpersonal events (e.g., "How would other people understand the intentions behind my best friend's behavior?").

- **Requesting feedback.** Rather than making assumptions about what other people are thinking and feeling, would the client be willing to ask them directly? For instance, if a client believes their manager is dissatisfied with their work, they could request a performance review? If a client is worried that a friend is upset with them, could they try asking directly whether they have done anything to offend?

- **Changing focus.** Invite the client to compare their performance and satisfaction with tasks or events when focusing on other people's thoughts and feelings versus focusing on their own opinions and goals.

- **Behavioral experiments.** It can be helpful to explore whether the client holds beliefs or assumptions which drive mind reading, such as, "I'm an accurate judge of what other people are thinking", or, "People are like an open book – it's easy to know what they are thinking". If assumptions like these are identified, clients can assess how accurate and helpful they are. Their attitudes towards healthier assumptions such as, "It doesn't matter what other people think", and "It is impossible to be approved of by everyone" can also be explored. Assumptions can also be reality-tested using behavioral experiments (e.g., "Let's see what happens when I do something nice for a person I think doesn't like me").

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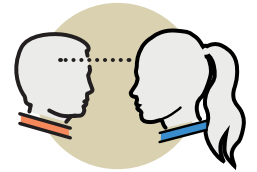
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When we feel strong emotions – such as fear, sadness, shame, or hopelessness – we have often just had an *automatic thought*. These thoughts can happen so quickly and effortlessly that we are not even aware we've had them. It can take practice to notice them as they arise. Automatic thoughts often feel convincing, but they are not always 100% accurate.

They are often *exaggerated*, *biased*, *distorted*, or *unrealistic*. There are different types of biases, which psychologists call *cognitive distortions* or *unhelpful thinking styles*. We all think in exaggerated ways sometimes, but it can become a problem if your thoughts are distorted very often or very strongly.

Mind reading is style of thinking where you automatically assume that you know what another person is thinking, or what they will think. For instance, you might assume that other people are judging you negatively or have bad intentions. Everyone is 'programmed' to care about what others think, but if you 'buy into' your mind-reading thoughts and they are very negative, they can make you feel anxious and sad.

They think I'm boring.

She thinks I'm going to steal something from her shop.

I can tell they think I'm a bad father.

He thinks I look disgusting.

Mind reading is common across a wide range of problems:

Anxiety   Body dysmorphia   EUPD   Depression   Delusions   Relationship problems   Social anxiety   Suicidality

Overcoming mind reading

Noticing and labeling

The first step in overcoming your mind reading thoughts (and actions) is to catch them. Practice self-monitoring so that you get better at catching your mind reading thoughts (and actions) as they happen. When you notice one, say something to yourself like:

- "I'm mind reading again."
- "There goes another 'mind reading' thought."

Change your focus

Mind reading can keep you preoccupied with what other people think. Experiment with focusing on something else (e.g. your goals or values) and see what happens.

- "I'm going to focus on expressing myself in the meeting, rather than on what other people think of my opinions."
- "Next time I swim, I'll focus on my form and behave as if I don't care what people think of my body."

Ask people what they think

How can you find out what other people really think? Often, the best way is to ask them. For example, you could ask them for feedback, or do a survey.

- "I think my manager is unhappy with my performance, but I can't be sure. I'll arrange a meeting and ask for feedback."
- "I worry that I have offended my friend because she hasn't returned my message, so I'm going to ask her directly if I have upset her."

Evaluate your thinking

There are lots of ways of judging any situation. You can practice putting your thoughts in perspective by asking yourself these questions:

- "Can I be 100% sure people think this?"
- "What evidence suggests people think something else?"
- "How helpful is it for me to mind-read about this?"
- "What would I say to a friend if they had this thought?"

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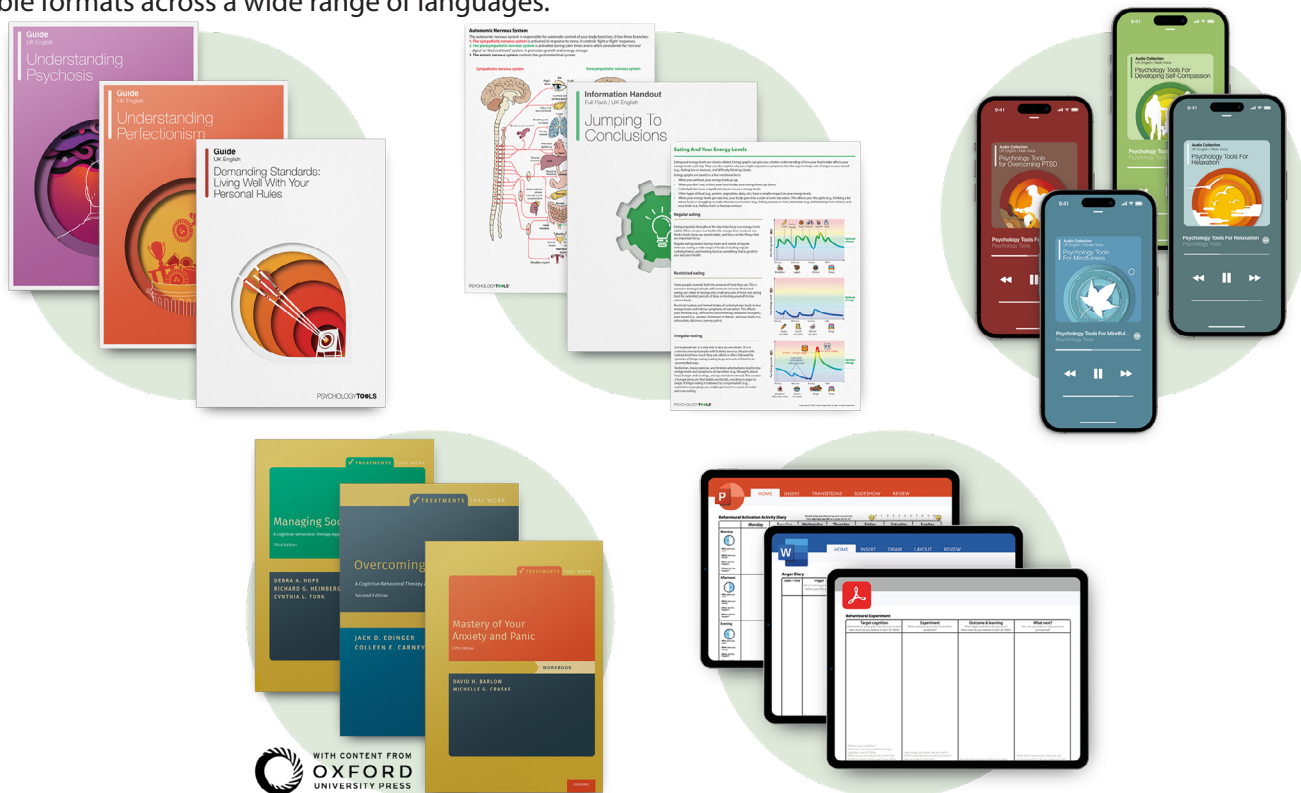
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