

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

Selective Attention



Description

This *Selective Attention* worksheet is a simple one-page illustration of the concept. Selective attention is a mechanism which serves to maintain a wide variety of clinical problems. For example, many unhelpful thinking styles (e.g. 'black & white thinking', 'magnification & minimization', 'mental filtering') are examples of selective attention and underpin conditions such as depression or anxiety. Self-focused attention (another form of selective attention) is critical in the maintenance of social anxiety disorder.

Instructions

This is a Psychology Tools information handout.

Suggested uses include:

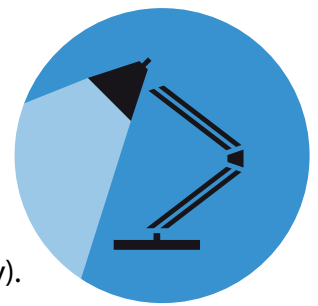
- Client handout – a psychoeducation resource.
- Discussion point – to provoke a discussion and explore your client's beliefs.
- Therapist learning tool – to improve your familiarity with a psychological construct.
- Supervision tool – to develop formulations and knowledge.
- Teaching resource – a learning tool during training.

References

Harvey, A., Watkins, E., Mansell, W., Shafran, R. (2005). *Cognitive behavioural processes across psychological disorders*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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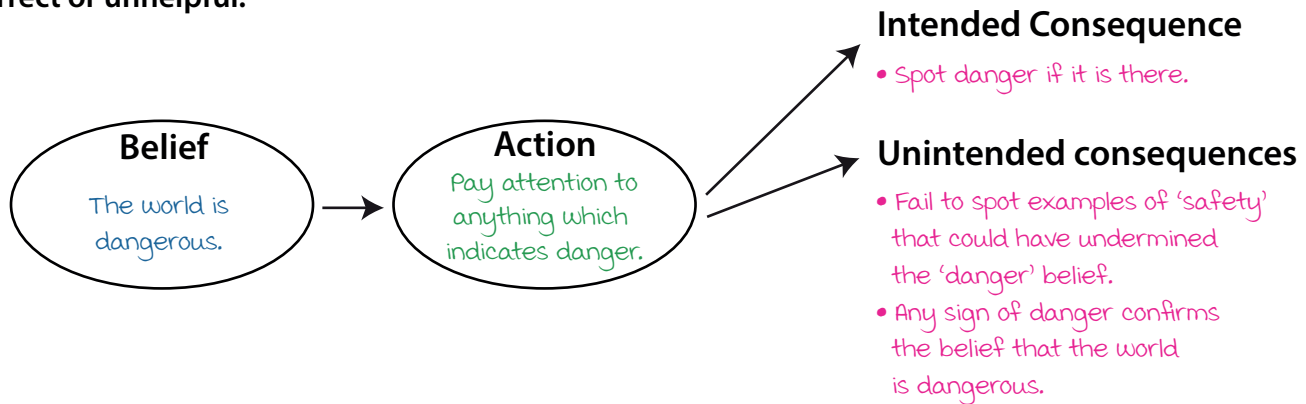
Our attention is like a light in the darkness. We can deliberately choose where we shine the light, but often the unconscious (out of awareness) part of our minds automatically 'chooses' what we pay attention to.



Selective attention means only paying attention to part of the evidence, and failing to pay attention to the rest. We can do this deliberately (consciously) or automatically (unconsciously). Our beliefs can affect what we pay attention to.

Selective attention causes problems to be prolonged or maintained in a number of ways:

1. You might miss information that could disprove your belief - so you might continue to believe something incorrect or unhelpful.



2. If you attend selectively to the world around you, you only take in a biased selection of the evidence, can only make a biased interpretation, and then store a biased memory of what happened.

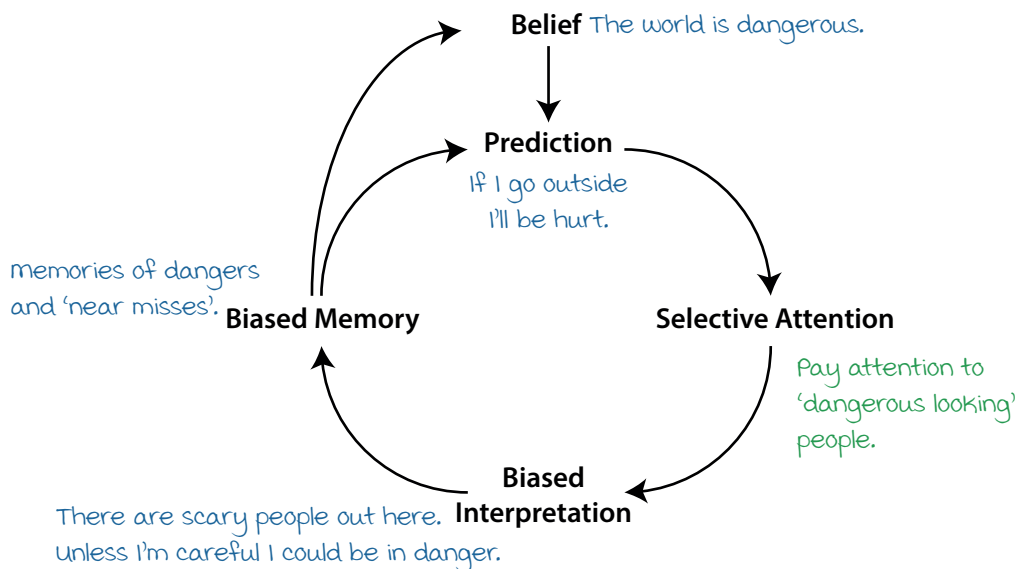


Diagram adapted from:
Fennell, M. J. V. (1999).
Overcoming low self-esteem.
London: Constable-Robinson

3. People who direct more attention inwards (to their thoughts, feelings, and body sensations) are more likely to blame themselves for the consequences of events, even when it is not their fault.

4. By focusing too much on the area of concern not as much attention is paid to everything else (this means that less knowledge is gained and fewer skills are learned, slowing progress in life).

5. If attention is diverted automatically, we may begin to feel that "my mind is out of control".

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Resource details

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