

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

Transdiagnostic Processes



Description

Rather than thinking of mental health diagnoses as separate 'disease entities' there is increasing awareness that common 'processes' or 'mechanisms', which underpin or act to maintain client problems, operate across disorders (Harvey et al, 2004). A 'transdiagnostic process' is the label given to a mechanism which is present across disorders, and which is either a risk factor or a maintaining factor for the disorder. Transdiagnostic processes are found in the domains of attention, memory/imagery, thinking, reasoning, and behavior. They can helpfully be thought of as the 'building blocks' which underpin disorders.

Examples of transdiagnostic processes include: the experience of 'intrusive memories' which are common to diverse conditions including depression, anxiety, PTSD, and eating disorders (Brewin et al, 2010); or 'repetitive negative thinking' which is a feature of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) in the form of worry, and depression in the form of ruminative thinking.

Empirically supported therapies all include interventions which target the processes maintaining a disorder: for example treatment for panic targets catastrophic misinterpretations of body sensations, and treatment for PTSD targets the experience of involuntary memory. However, there is a recognized need for clinicians to better understand the processes underlying dysfunction, and treatment strategies that target these processes (Hayes & Hoffman, 2018). The *Transdiagnostic Processes* worksheet is designed to help clinicians and their clients to understand core processes which are operating to prolong distress.

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

Brewin, C. R., Gregory, J. D., Lipton, M., & Burgess, N. (2010). Intrusive images in psychological disorders: characteristics, neural mechanisms, and treatment implications. *Psychological review*, 117(1), 210.

Harvey, A. G., Watkins, E., & Mansell, W., Shafran, R. (2004). *Cognitive behavioural processes across psychological disorders: A transdiagnostic approach to research and treatment*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Hayes, S. C., & Hofmann, S. G. (Eds.). (2018). *Process-based CBT: the science and core clinical competencies of cognitive behavioral therapy*. New Harbinger Publications.

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Avoidance



Avoidance can be external (we might avoid people, places, or situations) or it can be internal (we might avoid thoughts, feelings, or sensations). One problem with avoidance is that it doesn't give us an opportunity to find out how well we *could* have coped.

"Carl was so anxious about something catastrophic happening that he didn't leave the house. He even avoided going near the front door."

Biased memory



Memory bias means only recalling part of a story. People who are anxious find it easier to remember threatening information. People who are depressed often have 'overgeneral' memory and find it hard to recall specific events. Memory bias means that we are making decisions based on only part of the story.

"When Simon was depressed he found it hard to remember how it had ever felt to be happy."

Reinforcement



We are more likely to repeat actions that are followed by (are *reinforced* by) a good feeling – even if that behavior is not good for us in the long term.

"Nisha's toddler cried for sweets when she saw them at the supermarket. Nisha bought some for her daughter to make the crying stop. The toddler was quick to notice the sweets next time they went shopping..."

Safety behaviors



Safety behaviors are things that we do to avoid what we think could be a catastrophe. One problem with using safety behaviors is that they can prevent us from learning whether the bad outcome would ever have happened.

"Bettie worried about embarrassing herself. Whenever she went to the cinema Bettie always sat in a seat next to the aisle in case she felt anxious and needed to make a quick getaway."

Biased attention



Our attention is biased when we only notice part of a situation. One common problem is that if we only pay attention to our failures, and ignore our successes, we get a biased picture of ourselves.

"Julie had been hurt in the past. She was always on the lookout for ways she could be hurt again, and was very quick to notice when people (especially men) were acting in ways she found threatening. She was surprised that her friends didn't see the dangers she saw."

Biased thinking



There are many unhelpful thinking styles that mean we think about things in a 'wonky' or inaccurate way. Thinking in a biased way means that we are likely to reach biased conclusions. It would be a bit like a judge making a decision after only having listened to the evidence from the prosecution.

"Mary assumed that when people were looking at her they were judging her harshly and would criticise her. In fact, people barely noticed her."

Repetitive thinking



Rumination means going over and over problems and asking questions like "Why is my life always like this?". Some ways of thinking don't lead to the kinds of answers that will help us. Psychologists have found that "Why ... ?" questions are less helpful than "How ... ?" questions.

"Samantha went over and over her problems but never seemed to feel any better. She found it helpful to explore different ways of thinking with her therapist."

Self-criticism



Self-criticism means telling ourselves off for things we think we have 'done' or 'are'. In small doses a bit of self-criticism might be motivational ("Come on, you can do better!") but it is more often the case that our self-criticism is said in a punishing rather than an encouraging tone. Some people's inner critic can be oppressive.

"Lorraine's inner critic would always put her down. It was quick to notice her faults but never offered any praise."

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