
Mentalizing: Understanding Self & Others

Mentalizing refers to the imaginative activity of understanding mental states, thoughts, emotions, desires, and attitudes within oneself and others.

Reflective functioning is the capacity to understand that one's programmed automatic thinking is caused by insecurity from the past; and to instead pause, engage in self-control, and try not to project one's past experiences with others onto present interactions.

When a person feels emotionally overwhelmed when in the presence of others, they may feel shame and self-blame or tell themselves old programmed stories. If so, stop and do a cognitive reappraisal. Check out your automatic assumptions or soothe yourself. It is not mentally healthy to avoid direct communication with others or overthink.

A person's capacity to mentalize is shaped by their childhood experience of feeling their emotional reactions were mirrored by their parents – meaning, the process by which the adult represents the child's feelings in a manner that conveys recognition and understanding of the child's emotional state. When mirroring is done right in childhood, the child "sees himself," and "feels felt," which builds the child's internal sense of self.

However, when the caregiver insufficiently mirrors the child, the child internalizes representations of the caregiver's mind rather than his own—also called "false-self" experiences—which do not validate the child's experience. **The child then internalizes the parent's state of mind as a core part of himself (which causes self-abandonment).** In some cases, the parent's mirroring is about the child, but the mirrored state does not match what the child is feeling inside and this also can leave the child with an insecure sense of self.

Hyper-mentalizing occurs when one makes assumptions that can be inaccurate about other people's internal thoughts and feelings. Think of this as a sort of active social imagination. Mentalizing difficulties arise when an individual relies *exclusively* on automatic assumptions about others' mental states, which tend to be oversimplified.

To heal again, we need to make our thoughts explicit, operate more slowly, and use our pre-frontal cortex, the wise owl part of the brain.

Many people may perform relatively well (in terms of mentalizing) under low-stress conditions. However, under higher levels of stress, when automatic mentalizing naturally kicks in, you may find it much more challenging to activate the processes that underpin controlled mentalizing, so it will be harder to understand and reflect on what might be happening.

When we become emotionally overwhelmed, we may show considerable confusion as we are overcome by automatic assumptions about other people's internal states, and we find it challenging to reflect and think that, perhaps, the other person might be thinking or feeling something else.

Lack of marked mirroring by the parent is a significant component of insecure attachment. Self-esteem is based on requiring external validation.

Cognitive mentalizing involves the ability to name, recognize, and reason about mental states (in oneself or others). In contrast, **emotional mentalizing** involves the ability to understand the feeling of such states (again, in oneself or others), which is necessary for any genuine experience of empathy or a sense of self.

In the psychic equivalence mode, thoughts and feelings become too real, making it challenging for the individual to entertain alternative perspectives. When mentalizing gives way to psychic equivalence, thoughts are experienced as real and genuine, leading to what clinicians describe as "concrete brain" in their patients. There is a suspension of doubt, and the individual increasingly believes that his or her own perspective is the only one possible.

Sometimes we lack trust in others. When hyper-mentalizing, people can imagine that the motives of the communicator are cynical. This can make a person resistant to new information or alternative perspectives.

Mentalizing for Couples

Mentalizing gives us access to the emotional and psychological heart and mind of ourselves and others.

Healthy relating and functioning with others requires that we be able to mentalize; that is, to feel that the other person understands us from the inside and can put him or herself in our shoes.

Epistemic Trust refers to the crucial notion that feeling understood by our partner can serve as a signal for safety and allow us to turn off our defensiveness.

Mentalizing gets turned off when we feel threatened, vulnerable, not heard, and misunderstood.

When we feel defensive, we also have an increase in bodily arousal and activation of the fight, flight, freeze, or fix response. These responses are our programmed survival skills or defenses and they present differently for everyone. When we learn how to mentalize, then our defenses, which block connection, weaken. Mentalizing allows us to connect with another on many different levels.

When mentalizing works, we can come from a stance of engagement, attention, optimal arousal, humility, curiosity, openness, respect, acceptance, and tolerance for not knowing and we can convey a readiness to learn the other's thoughts feelings and intentions.

Relational patterns that block intimacy are set in motion when one member of the couple displays defensiveness and loss of mentalizing, which evokes a similar reaction in the other. The partner's defensive reaction, in turn reignites non-mentalizing and fosters a vicious cycle of reactivity. Also, higher levels of stress kick in a lack of mentalizing which happens when our core wounds get triggered.