

L07-mental wellbeing part 1. Irrationality & ABC model

Personal and Professional Development

Dorin Stanciu

Technical University of Cluj-Napoca

last update 19 November, 2020

mental hygiene & normality

mental hygiene and normality

rationality and irrationality

Mental hygiene refers to a person's healthy psychological, *i.e.*, cognitive and emotional functioning.

However, what is *healthy*, just as what is *normal* is not easy to define. We're mostly 'living inside our own minds', in the sense that there is a certain level of egocentrism and self-centeredness that obscures other perspectives of the world than our own.

Moreover, while we are all capable (in various degrees) of empathy and understanding other people's perspective or points of view, thinking and acting with these in mind is neither easy nor does it come automatically.

Being able to see other people's perspective and understand their emotional state must be doubled by conscious efforts to do so.

mental hygiene & normality

biases and cognitive distortions

People tend to process negative information deeper and more thoroughly than positive information, with very few exceptions. This tendency affects a large variety of psychological experiences, including the way we interact with others, how we form more distant or closer relationships with others, our emotional life, the way we learn, what we remember, how we think, the perception we create (including those referring to ourselves).

Studies suggest that the source of this preferential information processing is evolutionary in nature. More specifically, it may have served as an adaptive and protective mechanism during our evolution as a species and its main purpose was to protect us from negative events by functioning as an 'early warning' system. Other attempts to explain it indicate that negative stimuli may be processed preferentially because they are more contagious than positive stimuli, *i.e.*, their association levels with other elements/construals in our cognitive system is higher than for positive stimuli.

mental hygiene and normality

rationality and irrationality

Mental hygiene needs conscious efforts to be maintained. It is neither a given nor a certitude. People cope with stress, suffering and trauma in various ways, and not all coping mechanisms are healthy.

Consequently, the individual may develop coping mechanisms that, albeit alleviating the problem on the moment, turn out to be detrimental for the individual and/or for others around him, on the long run.

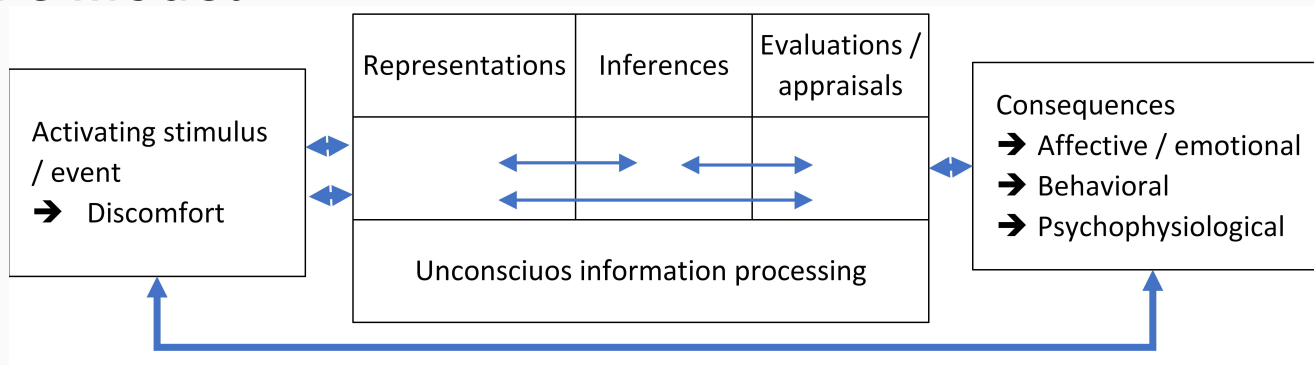
For instance, drinking socially is mostly viewed as an accepted behavior. There are also places where using recreational drugs, like marijuana, is allowed legally. From this legal and social acceptance, there is a very small step to use the effects of these substances to alleviate emotional problems.

However, not only both are only temporary solutions, addressing the symptoms and not the causes, they're also very detrimental on the long run.

mental hygiene and normality

rationality and irrationality

the ABC model



The ABC model (apud David, 2006)¹

The ABC model above describes how our behaviors and emotional states occur. Once a stimulus is powerful and/or significant enough, it triggers a series of mental information processing (many of which can be unconscious).

[1]David, D. O. (2006). *Psihologie clinică și psihoterapie: fundamente*. Polirom

mental hygiene and normality

rationality and irrationality

the ABC model

The information processings include representations, inferences, evaluations/appraisal which can build upon each other and other pre-existing knowledge.

It is important to note that the information processings include the previously mentioned beliefs, *i.e.*, consolidated appraisals held as valid with a high degree of certitude.

In turn, these cognitive processings trigger decisions, behaviors, emotional, and physiological consequences.

While the model was developed based on clinical and psychotherapeutic observations (hence the example of negative stimulation in the picture), it is a valid conceptualization for the entire causal mechanisms behind our behaviors and emotional states.

mental hygiene and normality

rationality and irrationality

the ABC model

Also important is that the sequence can, and usually is repeated in a loop, and the various components feed each other.

For instance, once a stimulus triggers the information processing, the individual may become more proactive in searching for other 'relevant' stimuli, meaningful for that particular context.

In turn, certain consequences, like highly loaded emotional states may either influence the information processing, or serve as stimuli.

mental hygiene and normality

rationality and irrationality

beliefs

We entertain a series of beliefs, *i.e.*, evaluations of reality and parts of the reality with a high degree of certitude and temporal stability.

In other words, we can appraise our knowledge of a certain situation or event as having a certain truth value associated with it (or certitude with respect to how well and complete our knowledge is in relation to said situation or event; this can also be another person, ourselves, our traits, etc.).

However, over time, certain beliefs tend to strengthen and consolidate. And, while some of these beliefs are objectively supported by evidence, some of them are rather naive.

Another important aspect of our beliefs is that they are not necessarily limited to straightforward appraisals, like, for instance, "X people are bad", but they may expand to include thought processes, like, for instance, "X people are bad because they don't believe in (this) God" or "gypsies are bad because everyone (sic!) knows that gypsies steal things".

mental hygiene and normality

rationality and irrationality

irrational beliefs

As mentioned above, our system of beliefs may, and sadly, often does include also 'detrimental' beliefs. Because almost all these beliefs originate from a distorted/biased and/or incomplete process of construction (belief consolidation is in significant part a process of knowledge building) they were termed "irrational beliefs".

Here, "irrational" designates not the absence of rationality or justification, but rather that they are the 'fruit of the poisoned tree', so to speak. At some point in our construction of these beliefs, parts of our reasoning were not valid, either because of false information or wrong reasoning.

mental hygiene and normality

rationality and irrationality

irrational beliefs. types

Clinical research identified four main types of irrational beliefs that are responsible for our emotional suffering:

- demandingness
- awfulizing
- self-downing / global evaluation
- catastrofization

an important caveat is that these types of beliefs do not occur in a vacuum, isolated from each other. They often combine with each other and form more complex maladaptive schemas.

mental health and irrationality

irrational beliefs. demandingness

demandingness

This type of thinking is characterized by formulating our thoughts of the manner "I must have/do/acquire/feel something/in a certain way, etc." or "Things/this/they need to be this/that way".

For instance, a maladaptive schema centered around demandingness may sound like "I must succeed in that interview (no matter what)" and be continued by expectations of bad consequences, *e.g.*, "otherwise this *bad consequence* will happen".

There is very little, if any room at all for alternatives, especially for variations less valued by that person. The person's ability to compromise is reduced significantly, and even dramatically in more severe cases.

mental health and irrationality

irrational beliefs. awfulizing

awfulizing

This type of thinking is characterized by formulating our thoughts of the manner "This is (absolutely) awful/terrible/horrendous, what's happening to me" or "If X happens, this will be awful". While frequent, the condition is not always explicit or if it is it doesn't have to be logically coherent.

For instance, an example of awfulizing thinking may be "If I don't get this job, *things will be terrible for me*".

People who exhibit this type of thinking tend to appraise the situations and events with a predominance of their worst aspects and/or take their negative aspects to the extreme, sometimes even presuming such catastrophic consequences without an immediate or direct basis.

mental health and irrationality

irrational beliefs. self-downing/global evaluation

self-downing/global evaluation

This type of thinking is characterized by formulating our thoughts of the manner "(if this happens) I am a terrible/bad/awful person". While frequent, the condition is not always explicit or if it is it doesn't have to be logically coherent.

For instance, an example of self-downing thinking may be "If I don't get this job, (it means that) *I am worthless*".

People who exhibit this type of thinking tend to evaluate themselves globally as less worthy if some condition is not met.

mental health and irrationality

irrational beliefs. low frustration tolerance

low frustration tolerance

This type of thinking is characterized by formulating our thoughts of the manner "(if this happens) I cannot take/stand/suffer it/this". While frequent, the condition is not always explicit or if it is it doesn't have to be logically coherent.

For instance, an example of low-frustration tolerance when thinking may be "If I don't get this job, (it means that) *I am worthless*".

People who exhibit this type of thinking tend to appraise their own abilities to be insufficient to withstand a certain situation or a challenging/troublesome context.