Module:
Psychological Foundations of Mental Health

Week 4
Beyond basic cognition and emotion

Topic in Action
Metacognition – Part 1 of 4

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Lecture transcript

Slide 2
In the previous lectures of week four, we covered topics including attitudes, emotions, beliefs, appraisals, heuristics, and more. Although we covered much ground, there is one type of thought process that we have so far ignored, metacognition, or thinking about thinking.

Covering metacognition is important, because it will give us insights into how people reflect on themselves, how they develop theories about their present and future, and how this relates to phenomena such as worry and rumination.

By the end of this lecture, you will have a basic understanding of various metacognitive processes and theories. You will learn how they affect people's self-evaluations. And, in the last part, Dr. Hirsch will discuss how metacognition relates to worry and rumination, which are in turn important for understanding mental health.

Slide 4
What is metacognition? We can simply define it as people's beliefs about their own thinking processes. Thus, it is a sort of second-order form of consciousness. Think of it as if you're looking at yourself in the mirror. What do you think about yourself? How are you thinking about yourself? And what will be the results of your own thoughts? These are examples of metacognitive questions.

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We can distinguish between four broad categories of metacognition. This is helpful, because it groups specific metacognitive processes, and there are many of those, into broader families. These metacognition types are thoughts about our own subjective states, such as feelings and emotions, thoughts about our own self-concepts, for example, what we are like, thoughts about how others perceive us, and thoughts or entire theories about how cognitive processes work in general.

In the next sections, I will discuss a selection of particularly important specific phenomena associated with each of these groups of metacognitions. This will give you a more detailed understanding of what each of these metacognitive types represent.

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First of all, people can have metacognitions about their own subjective states, such as feelings and emotions. That loosely means, thinking about how we are feeling. Imagine, for example, that you feel sad, but are not sure why this is the case. You may think about potential causes. Perhaps you feel a little lonely today. Maybe the rain makes you feel sad or perhaps you had a bad dream that woke you up in the morning.

Metacognitions about our feelings can be very influential. This is nicely illustrated by the effect heuristic, also sometimes referred to as the how do I feel about it heuristic. Remember that from earlier this week, heuristics are fast, efficient, but not necessarily infallible rules of thumb that help us to develop an attitude and make decisions.

One of these heuristics that people use is to ask themselves, how do I feel right now, when making a difficult decision. Imagine you want to buy a car, but don't know what to decide. According to the effect heuristic, you will reflect on how you feel and use it as a way to judge what you think of the car.

Essentially, you use your gut feeling. Importantly, how you feel may have, in reality, nothing to do with what you think about the actual car. For example, you may feel good simply because it is a sunny day.

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The second group of metacognitions are those thoughts we have about our self-concept, or who we think we are. Imagine that you are asked to describe yourself in a job interview. You may see yourself as extroverted, conscientious, and perhaps a little perfectionistic. These are examples of metacognitive thoughts.

Mind you, these thoughts you have about yourself may not be accurate. For example, it could be that you behave far less extroverted than you think you are. In fact, research suggests that incorrect thoughts about self-concepts are very common. People are fundamentally self-enhancers. They like to think more positively about themselves than they really are.

For example, when people think of their own past successes, they tend to underestimate how long ago these successes were, thus, subjectively, bringing their past successes closer to their present self. Reversely, people overestimate how long ago their failures happened, essentially distancing themselves from these unpleasant events. Note that these processes can occur fully unconsciously. People may not realise that their overly positive self-concepts are biassed.

In the next lecture, I will discuss metacognition about the self in more detail, because these processes are very important. In particular, I will focus on how we compare who we think we are with who we think we ought to be and who we think we want to be.

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A third and more complicated type of metacognition, our thoughts where we do not think about how we think of ourselves, but what we think that others think of us. For example, when you present yourself at the said job talk, you may think that the interviewer's may likely see you as having a professional attitude, because you are wearing your most formal outfit that you possess.

By thinking about what others think of you, you become able to disconfirm or confirm these predictions, thus influencing other people's opinions about you. These metacognitive processes are evident in persuasion. How will you try to persuade another person depends strongly on your own thoughts about how you think the other person thinks about you and what they will or will not be convinced by.

Another influential form of these metacognitions are evident in so-called meta-stereotypes, stereotypes that we believe others hold about the groups that we belong to. Meta-stereotypes are very influential and can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies.

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In an educational context, for example, girls may hold the metacognitive belief that teachers think that they are not good at math compared to boys. Due to this mental stereotype, these girls may feel anxious about their math performance or avoid the topic altogether. As a result, the stereotype that math is for boys gets reinforced, completing the self-fulfilling prophecy.

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A broader group of metacognition is the family of folk psychology. These are, for example, lay theories that people have about cognitive processes. For example, people may believe that intelligence is something determined at birth, which is not necessarily correct. Or people may believe that being in a quiet, calm environment may help them think clearly about a difficulty. These are examples of folk beliefs about cognitive processes. Some of these may be more accurate than others.

Another group of metacognitions that we can group under folk psychology are people's beliefs about how their emotions change over time. For example, in response to a breakup.