Module: Psychological Foundations of Mental Health

Week 4
Beyond basic cognition and emotion

Topic in Action
Metacognition – Part 2 of 4

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Lecture transcript

Slide 3
In the following section I'm going to discuss two examples of metacognition that are very influential in terms of people's behaviours, self-discrepancy theory and effective forecasting.

Slide 4
Let's start with self-discrepancy theory. This theory deals with the ways in which we think about our self-concept. In particular, it emphasises there are at least three important ways in which we can say we think about ourselves, who we think we are, who we think we ought to be, and who we think we want to be. These thoughts about our self-concept shape what we feel and how we behave. The first one, who we think we are, is the most straightforward one. It refers to our so-called actual self.

The old self, on the other hand is who we believe we should be. For example, you may think that you ought to be more frequently visiting your parents or you may think that you ought to be more careful about talking behind people's back. This old self consists of the person we think we should be, according to our duties and our obligations to others. Some elements of our old selves we may not particularly like, but nonetheless, we feel that we should possess them. For example, if you tend to pick the largest slice of cake when you are offered some, you may realise that you ought not to do that, even though you really like cake. The old self is different from what we refer to as our ideal self.

Our ideal self does not consist of features that we feel we should possess, but rather things that we ideally want to possess. For example, your ideal self may be an expert piano player, even though your actual self, who you really are, is only a mediocre player. Your ideal self may be an extremely famous psychologist, even though you haven't quite reached that status yet. In essence, our ideal self consists of what we aspire to be, our dreams, hopes, and long-term goals.

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Why is it useful to make these distinctions between the actual, old, and ideal self? It is important because the difference between them, or discrepancies, influence what we feel and do. Say for example that there is a discrepancy between our actual self, who we feel we are, and our old self, who we feel we should be. For example, imagine you feel that you ought to visit your parents more often. Discrepancies between our actual and old self tend to make us feel agitated and frustrated. As

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a result, we may feel compelled to behave more in line of what is normatively expected from us.

Discrepancies between our actual and ideal self promote different feelings and behaviours. When people feel that they are not living up to their ideal self, they tend to feel sad, dejected, and disappointed with their lives. People feel that they are not living up to their dreams and aspirations. These discrepancies, however, also trigger behaviours. They make us go after the hopes that we have, motivating us to get closer to our long term goals. Thus, even though these discrepancies are unpleasant, they are also functional.

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The way that discrepancies between our actual, old, and ideal selves shape our emotions, motivations, and behaviours is the foundation of self-regulation, how people control and direct their own actions, emotions, and thoughts, especially, how people formulate and pursue their goals. This is important for understanding behaviour such as dieting. For example, if you set very ambitious dieting goals, or in other words, your ideal self is very unrealistic compared to your actual self, then you will likely face a lot of sadness and disappointment. Instead, if you set a more realistic ideal self, you may find it less distressing when comparing where you are at present to where you want to be at the end of your dieting plan. In fact, research suggests that setting many incremental goals, rather than one very ambitious goal, helps people succeed in their self-regulatory strivings, such as obtaining their ideal weight.

Slide 7
A different, but also influential, metacognitive processes is effective forecasting, the act of predicting how our feelings and emotions will unfold over time. Imagine, for example, that you just broke up with your partner and feel bad about this. How long will this last? And how bad will you feel over the course of time? Alternatively, imagine a positive event, you just won the lottery. How long will you enjoy this? How lasting and intense is the happiness that you feel in response to this event?

Slide 8
Strikingly, research shows that people are not as good as they believe in predicting how their emotions unfold over time in response to pleasant or unpleasant events. In fact, people tend to make two prediction mistakes. They show an intensity bias and a durability bias. The durability bias refers to the fact that people tend to overestimate how long they will suffer from negative events, such as a breakup, or how long they will enjoy positive events, such as winning the lottery.

The intensity bias reflects that people, besides overestimating the duration of their effective responses, also overestimate how intense these feelings are. Against people's expectations, emotional reactions to positive and negative events are often much shorter lived and less intense than they think. Time heals all wounds and tempers momentary pleasure.

Slide 9
Why do people make these metacognitive mistakes? How is it possible that people are systematically biassed when thinking about their own emotional responses? There are, in fact, a variety of reasons for this. First and foremost, there is a process of hedonic adaptation. Over time people get used to their positive or negative feelings and typically go back to a mildly positive state of feeling.

Besides that, people tend to suffer from immune neglect. This refers to the fact that people do not realise that they possess various psychological tools and strategies that help them to overcome negative feelings, in particular. For example, people may think that they will never get over their breakup, but in reality they do. They process a difficult situation, start making sense of what went wrong, and plan for the future. Essentially, their psychological immune system kicks in, helping them to cope with the distress, even though that seemed so unlikely at time the difficult event.

Another source of forecasting biases is focalism. People tend to overly focus on the positive or negative events, forgetting all the other things that will happen in the future. For example, after the

breakup or winning the lottery, there are other and regular things that require people's attention. They go to work. They meet up with friends. They may go on a short holiday, etc. All these different experiences dilute the impact of the original pleasant or unpleasant event. Thus, there will be more going on than people realise when they forecast their emotions. People simply forget to think about other things happening in their lives.

There are more reasons for forecasting errors. But the above ones are amongst the most important. In the next lectures, Dr. Hirsch will talk about metacognitions in the context of worry and rumination, how these thought processes work, and what they do to people.

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