

The Depressed Brain: An Evolutionary Systems Theory

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ABSTRACT

Major depressive disorder is a debilitating condition characterised by diverse neurocognitive and behavioural deficits. Nevertheless, our species-typical capacity for depressed mood implies that it serves an adaptive function. Here, we apply an interdisciplinary theory of brain function to explain depressed mood and its clinical manifestations. Combining insights from the free-energy principle with evolutionary theorising in psychology, we argue that depression reflects an adaptive response to perceived threats of aversive social outcomes (e.g., exclusion) that minimises the likelihood of surprising interpersonal exchanges (i.e., those with unpredictable outcomes). We suggest **that psychopathology typically arises from ineffectual attempts to alleviate interpersonal difficulties and/or hyper-reactive neurobiological responses to social stress (i.e., uncertainty), which often stems from early experience that social uncertainty is difficult to resolve.**

Keywords: Active Inference; Evolutionary Systems Theory; Depression; Free-Energy Principle; Major Depressive Disorder

17 **An Evolutionary Systems Approach to Depression**

18 Why do we become depressed? Why are some of us particularly prone to depression?
19 And how is this best managed? To answer these questions, we require an
20 interdisciplinary approach that synthesises studies of the depressed brain with
21 psychological research on its ecological, ontogenetic and biobehavioural correlates [1,
22 2]. To this end, we apply an integrative **evolutionary systems theory (EST) of human**
23 **brain function** to explain depressed mood and its clinical manifestations. The EST in
24 question rests on two uncontroversial assumptions. The first appeals to a consensus
25 among cognitive scientists that the brain is a hierarchical, self-organising system
26 sculpted by evolution [3-5]. This hierarchy ranges from lower-order, highly
27 specialised neural subsystems responsible for sensory-motor processing; through to
28 highly integrated cortical regions that develop more gradually and underlie the
29 sophisticated, executive cognitive faculties unique to humans [see Box 1]. This calls
30 for a theory of global brain function that explains how depression emerges from
31 coordinated interactions within hierarchically integrated neuronal systems. The
32 second assumption echoes dynamic systems approaches that situate the brain within
33 the evolutionary dynamics of the brain-body-environment system [6-8]. According to
34 this view, the neural mechanisms responsible for depression can only be understood
35 by considering the broader context of human evolution, enculturation, development,
36 embodiment and behaviour.

37

38 We aim to exemplify this approach by offering an interdisciplinary hypothesis of the
39 depressed brain. Following the free-energy principle (FEP; see [5]), we first discuss
40 how depressive disorders emerge from the functioning of, and disruptions to,
41 hierarchical neural dynamics that seek to minimise uncertainty. We then integrate this

work with psychological research on the adaptive function of depression, along with the familial, developmental and psychobiological mechanisms that often underlie it. We propose that our species-typical capacity for depressed mood can be explained as an evolved biobehavioural strategy that responds adaptively to adverse interpersonal conditions by minimising the likelihood of unpredictable social interactions. We discuss how our model builds on theories of clinical depression in the active inference literature, before turning to the hierarchical neural mechanics that underlie depressed mood and depressive disorder.

Applying the Free-Energy Principle to Depression

The FEP is a global theory of neural structure and function suggesting the brain can be seen as a “prediction machine” that attempts to maximise the evidence for a creature’s model of the world by minimising an upper limit on surprise [i.e., free-energy; see Box 2]. In line with predictive coding, the FEP describes the brain as a hierarchical generative model – a hierarchy of hypotheses about the world that enables a reduction of surprise by minimising discrepancies between incoming sensory inputs and top-down predictions [9]. Conditional expectations are thought to be encoded by deep pyramidal cells (i.e., representation units) at each level of the cortical hierarchy that convey predictions downward to suppress errors at the level below, while prediction errors are encoded by superficial pyramidal cells (i.e., error units) that convey errors forward to revise expectations at the level above [10]. This allows us to minimise surprise by updating our internal models (i.e., perception). Alternatively, we can selectively sample sensory data to ensure that our predictions are self-fulfilling – by changing how we act upon the world to confirm our expectations (i.e., active inference [11]). Thus, perception and action operate

67 synergistically to minimise prediction errors and optimise our internal representations
68 of the environment. A key corollary of this model is that our predictions are optimised
69 by evolution, development and learning. Emphasis is placed on adaptive priors –
70 inherited expectations about the way our world unfolds that have been shaped by
71 natural selection to guide action-perception cycles toward adaptive (i.e., unsurprising)
72 states [5, 12].

73

74 To date, applications of the FEP to depressive disorders have chiefly concentrated on
75 two processes, stemming from different levels of the cortical hierarchy. **The first**
76 **relates to limbic deficits in minimising prediction error.** Barrett and colleagues
77 suggest that depressive disorders arise from aberrant interoceptive predictions
78 originating from abnormalities within the (limbic) **agranular visceromotor cortex,**
79 which is central to emotional processing, energy regulation and allostatic responses to
80 stress [13, 14]. These abnormalities can arise from past exposure to sustained distress,
81 and generate **false (interoceptive)** predictions about the body's upcoming autonomic,
82 metabolic and immunological needs that chronically activate physiological stress
83 responses (e.g., dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and
84 pro-inflammatory states). Over time, the visceromotor systems try to minimise
85 prediction error by producing sickness behaviours (e.g., negative affect and fatigue;
86 also see [15]) that reduce energy expenditure and ultimately manifest in depression
87 [13]. Here, depression is seen as a disorder of allostasis, characterised by energy
88 dysregulation and deficits in interoceptive inference; i.e., an insensitivity to prediction
89 errors and/or a miscalibration of their precision – see glossary [14]. These deficits
90 lead to a failure to update **dysfunctional internal models** (e.g., cognitive rigidity),

91 perpetuating further metabolic inefficiencies and engendering the downward spiral
92 that **typifies** depressive illness.

93

94 The second class of models concentrates on impairments in top-down expectations of
95 reward. Checkrout [16] has **described the depressed brain as a hierarchical**
96 **constellation of depressive beliefs**, which impose a consistent negative bias in
97 predictions that manifests in anhedonic features and the down-regulation of neural
98 reward systems (e.g., dopaminergic and serotonergic dysfunction). In line with active
99 inference, these beliefs exacerbate depression by prompting the individual to actively
100 sample the environment to confirm negative predictions (e.g., learned helplessness).
101 Others have suggested that depressive disorders impair reward-approach behaviours
102 by causing a pathological underconfidence in one's predictions [17], or by distorting
103 higher-order evaluations of the self (e.g., low self-worth), **disrupting social behaviour**
104 **by overweighting the likelihood of aversive interactions** [18]. Each of these proposals
105 echo models of reinforcement learning in computational psychiatry and evolutionary
106 biology suggesting that depression emerges from successive discrepancies between
107 actual and expected reward outcomes (i.e., prediction errors), **entrenching** (empirical)
108 prior beliefs that rewards are unlikely which inhibit reward-approach behaviours [19,
109 20].

110

111 Taken together, the frameworks considered here suggest that depression entails
112 impairments in reward-approach systems emerging from two neurocognitive
113 processes – **deficits in the predictive processing of sensory evidence**; and prior beliefs
114 that negatively bias predictions. Although this perspective of depression as false
115 inference offers a cohesive, neurobiologically plausible account of the biobehavioural

116 deficits observed in depressive illness, two important questions remain. First, by
117 concentrating on depressive disorders, the models above say little about our species-
118 typical capacity for depressed or low mood. The notable exception is a formal
119 (computational) scheme that defines emotional valence in terms of the rate of change
120 in free-energy over time, with positive and negative affect tracking a decrease and
121 increase in free-energy, respectively (see [17]). In this model, negative moods enable
122 an organism to respond adaptively to unexpected changes in the world by increasing
123 the (learning) rate of evidence accumulation – overweighing recent sensory inputs
124 over prior experiences to heighten sensitivity to environmental change, thereby
125 minimising prediction error [17]. However, this does not specifically address the
126 adaptive significance of depression per se. Second, the literature to date sheds little
127 light on the ecological conditions responsible for the positive selective pressure that
128 depression appears to have [see Box 3]. If depression instantiates an adaptive prior, it
129 should minimise surprise in response to specific environmental challenges that have
130 threatened our inclusive fitness (i.e., free-energy) over evolutionary time. **Identifying**
131 **this adaptive function is arguably central to understanding why depression occurs.** To
132 address these issues, we hope to build upon the active inference literature by
133 incorporating complementary insights drawn from an evolutionary systems approach
134 to psychology.

135

136 **Insights from an Evolutionary Systems Approach to Psychology**

137 In psychology, evolutionary systems models have typically focused on the dynamic
138 interplay between evolutionary and developmental processes (e.g., [8, 21-25]), an
139 approach that has been further extended to reconcile theoretical divisions between
140 major paradigms in the field (see [4]). According to this perspective, the embodied

141 brain and behaviour emerge from selection acting on dynamic interactions between
142 the levels of causation identified by Tinbergen – adaptation, phylogeny, ontogeny,
143 and mechanism [26]. This causal hierarchy is arguably recapitulated by paradigms in
144 psychology, which concentrate differentially on four overlapping levels of
145 explanation – ultimate hypotheses for adaptive, species-typical characteristics (i.e.,
146 evolutionary psychology); epigenetic explanations for intergenerational, between-
147 group differences (i.e., evolutionary developmental biology and psychology);
148 dynamical explanations for individual similarities and differences (i.e., developmental
149 psychology); and mechanistic explanations for real-time phenomena (i.e.,
150 psychological subdisciplines such as cognitive, biological, personality, social and
151 clinical psychology) [4]. Central to EST is the need to explore how these causal levels
152 interact – evolutionary influences on neural structure and function constrain
153 individual development and learning, while effects at these more proximate levels can
154 shape the evolution of the brain [3, 27]. To explain depression then, we require a
155 multi-level hypothesis that synthesises diverse fields of psychological inquiry to
156 explain both why it is adaptive, along with how it emerges from intergenerational,
157 developmental and real-time mechanisms.

158
159 Although there are various Darwinian models of depression [28], a theme common to
160 many of these is that low mood reflects an adaptive biobehavioural strategy that
161 conserves or reallocates energy and resources in **unpropitious** social environments [29,
162 30]. According to this view, depressed mood states are elicited by aversive
163 interpersonal outcomes (e.g., exclusion, defeat, or loss) that indicate a critical loss of
164 control over social relationships that were critical to ancestral fitness [31]. A model
165 that incorporates influential theories in this area and shows promising conceptual

166 parallels with the FEP is the social risk hypothesis (technically, risk corresponds to
167 uncertainty and uncertainty is expected surprise or free energy). This maintains that
168 depressed mood reflects an adaptive, risk-averse approach to social interaction that
169 reduces the likelihood of further aversive outcomes by: (1) increasing our cognitive
170 sensitivity to (sensory) cues of social risk; (2) reducing our (behavioural) propensity
171 for taking social risks; and (3) initiating signalling behaviours that elicit support and
172 defuse conflict [32].

173

174 The idea that depression reflects an evolved response to adverse social conditions
175 concords with evidence that extends across Tinbergen's remaining levels of inquiry.
176 The intergenerational transmission of susceptibility to depressive disorders due to
177 deleterious social environments is widely documented [33, 34], with studies involving
178 rodents, primates, and humans showing that exposure to social stressors (e.g., low
179 maternal care and social defeat) produces potentially heritable epigenetic changes that
180 confer risk for disorder by heightening stress reactivity [35, 36]. Ontogenetically,
181 exposure to early social stress (e.g., parental loss, abuse, or neglect) is a strong
182 predictor of depressive vulnerability [37], and is thought to heighten susceptibility to
183 disorder by leading to hyperactivity of the HPA axis [38, 39] and up-regulating pro-
184 inflammatory immune responses [40]. Behavioural and neuroimaging studies further
185 suggest that the risk of depressive onset rises markedly in adolescence because of an
186 increased sensitivity to social threats in this period [41, 42]. Finally, research across
187 the sub-disciplines highlights an intimate connection between depression and the
188 social world (see [43]). For example, the precipitants of depression are typically
189 interpersonal in nature [44]; social support and belonging are key protective factors
190 [45]; and typical correlates of depression clearly exemplify negative self-other

relations (e.g., low self-esteem [46]). Consistent with the social risk hypothesis, there are also multiple lines of evidence to suggest that low mood is associated with biobehavioural changes that facilitate adaptive responses to social stress. Depressive cognition is characterised by a specific, attentional bias towards socially-threatening stimuli [47] and increased rumination about interpersonal problems [48], while normative depressed states have been shown to increase the accuracy of social inferences (e.g., depressive realism [49]) and improve social problem-solving [50]. Furthermore, many features of depression – such as **anhedonia**, a negative thinking bias and social withdrawal – reduce exposure to social risks by inhibiting reward-approach behaviours [51], while the signalling behaviours associated with depression (e.g., reassurance-seeking and submissive behaviours) explicitly attempt to elicit support and defuse potential conflict [52-54]. Notably, other studies have provided direct empirical support for the social risk hypothesis itself (Badcock & Allen, 2003; Badcock & Allen, 2007; Dunn, Whelton & Sharpe, 2012; Girard, Cohn, Mahoor, Mavadati, & Rosenwald, 2013).

In light of such work, we suggest that the human capacity for depressed mood can be explained in terms of a risk-averse adaptive prior that minimises uncertainty in the social world when sensory cues indicate both a high degree of socio-environmental volatility (i.e., unpredictability) and an increased probability of aversive interpersonal outcomes (e.g., rejection, defeat or loss) (see Figure 1). This depressive response instantiates a “better safe than sorry” strategy that minimises the likelihood of unpredictable social interactions by causing adaptive changes in cognition (e.g., hypersensitivity to aversive social stimuli, a negative thinking bias and deficits in responses to reward) and action (e.g., risk-averse behaviours such as social

withdrawal). Epigenetic and ontogenetic mechanisms arguably support this function by sensitising the individual to socio-environmental volatility when developmental insults indicate that the probability of aversive social interactions is high, producing hyper-reactive stress response systems that heighten risk for disorder by increasing the precision of social prediction errors and prompting exaggerated, pathological responses to interpersonal stressors.

Notably, the exacerbation of normative depressed states into severe, dysfunctional forms is also likely when depressive changes fail to alleviate social stress, creating a self-perpetuating cycle arising from heightened and prolonged arousal of ineffectual attempts to reduce socio-environmental volatility [32]. This, in turn, is likely to chronically activate neurophysiological stress responses and leads to debilitating sickness behaviours [13, 14]. As discussed above, previous applications of the FEP suggest that this depressive spiral is engendered by a positive feedback loop between two neurocognitive mechanisms – the increased precision of social prediction errors, coupled with a negative bias affecting social predictions. Following active inference, this is likely to engender ongoing depressive behaviours that seek to confirm negative biases, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (i.e., high predictability) born from mutually reinforcing patterns of cognition and behaviour [16]. Here, depressed can be interpreted as a maladaptive pattern of dysregulated defences – if this depressive response is effective, an individual either escapes or avoids the social stressor or adapts to it; if the defence fails, the individual is at risk of entering a self-perpetuating dysregulated state, which falls beyond the normal range of adaptive functioning (Allen & Badcock, 2003; Gilbert, 2001). Nevertheless, it should also be recognised that clinical manifestations of depression can result from asocial causes that produce

neurobiological abnormalities typically associated with dysregulated mood (e.g., pro-inflammatory immune responses induced by illness and medications; 40).

The Depressed Brain

It is widely accepted that depression emerges from bidirectional interactions between hierarchically organised neural regions. Most of the theoretical work in this area concentrates on two general brain systems that work in concert – a ventral affective system, including subcortical regions such as the amygdala and ventral striatum; and the prefrontal cortex (PFC), which modulates the reactions of the ventral affective system [1]. These systems are composed of subcortical neural circuits responsible for the unconscious processing of affective and social stimuli on the one hand; and on the other, executive networks that regulate affective states, with medial prefrontal regions playing a particularly important role in modulating visceral and behavioural responses in order to adapt them to the external milieu [1].

More particularly, evidence gleaned from neuroimaging and animal studies suggests that depression involves dysfunction of the “extended visceromotor network”, in which the medial PFC regulates affective states by modulating visceromotor output via connections with the amygdala, ventral striatum, hypothalamus, and other subcortical regions [55]. Brain regions across this network regulate motivation (e.g., anhedonia and dopaminergic function) and neurobiological responses to stress, and play a central role in social threat and reward processing [39, 41, 56, 57]. Neurodevelopmental changes in these regions throughout adolescence are also thought to heighten vulnerability to disorder by increasing sensitivity to rapidly changing social contexts in this period (see Box 4). Collectively, such findings fit well

with our proposal that depression often stems from the need to adapt to complex social contexts, and manifests through the bidirectional interplay of hierarchical neuronal processes.

Specifically, we speculate that the extended visceromotor system responds to volatility in the social environment by increasing the precision of social prediction errors, initiating changes in neuronally encoded expectations that increase attention to social cues and motivate risk-averse behaviours (e.g., social withdrawal). This heightened sensitivity to somatic and affective cues leads, in turn, to further avoidance of interpersonal stressors. The depressive response is adaptive when changes in mood state and behaviour reduce uncertainty in the face of socio-environmental change, and lead to re-engagement with that environment when volatility abates (which should, at least in part, be brought about by depressive behaviours; see [32]). However, following the active inference literature, we suggest that the depressive response becomes maladaptive when there are (neuromodulatory) failures of “precision engineered” visceromotor inference – produced, for instance, by sustained social distress – leading to illness behaviours which fail to respond to improvements in interpersonal contexts and can often exacerbate socio-environmental stress [13, 14]. Neurodevelopmentally, the PFC can also potentiate vulnerability to depression by underwriting the formation of distal goals that, when frustrated by rejection or failure, can lead to depression by suppressing the brain’s reward system [58] and the confidence in (or precision of) our beliefs about behaviour [59], thereby inhibiting goal-directed behaviours.

Ultimately, our basic claim is that depression can be viewed as an adaptive faculty that underwrites emotional allostasis in an increasingly prosocial and volatile world. Physiologically, this faculty increases sensitivity to interpersonal, affiliative and interoceptive cues. Clearly, sensitisation to stressful exteroceptive and interoceptive cues also has to be predicted by the hierarchical brain, which implicates the functional neuroanatomy described above. Under active inference, sensitivity to stress-related cues corresponds to their precision [13, 60], implicating neuromodulatory systems associated with reward, action selection and interoceptive inference [61-63]. Crucially, in order to act it is also necessary to attenuate the precision afforded to the sensory consequences of action (i.e., we have to ignore the fact that we are not currently acting). This means that an adaptive depressive response suspends sensory attenuation – and action – so that we can attend to interpersonal prediction errors and revise our (posterior) beliefs about our relationships with others, via perceptual inference and learning. Sensory attenuation can be regarded as the complement of sensory attention; i.e., attenuating or augmenting the gain (precision) afforded sensory prediction errors to ignore or select sensory information, respectively. According to this scheme, maladaptive forms of depression reflect a pervasive, self-maintaining failure of sensory attenuation, leading to ruminations, false inference and a concomitant inability to act and test these false beliefs.

Interestingly, exactly the same conclusions (namely, a failure of sensory attenuation) have been drawn for a range of neuropsychiatric disorders, ranging from autism [64] to schizophrenia [65]. One could ask what is specific about this mechanism in depression, and respond by referring to the particular (interoceptive and affiliative) modalities affected. However, perhaps the more intriguing implication is that the

comorbidity of depression and other disorders might arise from a common pathophysiological mechanism, which can be explained in terms of false inference.

Concluding Remarks

In this opinion piece, we have endeavoured to contribute to the active inference literature on mood disorder by suggesting that normative levels of depressed mood instantiate an adaptive prior that minimises the likelihood of surprising interpersonal interactions when faced with threats of aversive social outcomes that typically compromised ancestral fitness. By extending beyond previous applications of the FEP to emphasise both the adaptive function of low mood and the causal role of the social ecology, we believe our model demonstrates the heuristic benefits of combining active inference with insights in psychology to improve our understanding of depressed mood and mood disorder. It also motivates new questions for research, calling for greater integration between neuroscientific and psychological approaches to explore the ways in which the neural mechanisms that underpin depression relate to behaviour, development and the social world [see Outstanding Questions]. In particular, the idea that depression can emerge from the need to navigate social risks stands to inform theory-driven approaches in computational psychiatry, which improve our understanding, prediction and treatment of mental illness by using simulations and mathematical models to capture complex interactions across multiple causal levels [19, 66].

That said, we do not wish to imply that depression is solely attributable to social causes. In evolutionary psychology, for instance, the distinction between social and non-social depressive responses is widely recognised [Durisko 2015; Gilbert 2006],

340 and as we have noted, depression can also arise from depressogenic neuroanatomical
341 abnormalities produced by influences other than unfavourable social conditions.
342 Nevertheless, our model adds to the active inference literature by emphasising the
343 importance of the social environment in explaining the **aetiology** and phenomenology
344 of depression. This underscores the need to develop (computational) diagnostic tools
345 that are capable of distinguishing between social and non-social forms in order to
346 inform treatment decisions.

347

348 In closing, our model also promotes clear avenues for intervention. To date,
349 proponents of the FEP have advocated treatments that directly target dysregulated
350 neural systems, such as psychopharmacological agents that act upon the
351 neurotransmitter systems that encode precision or uncertainty (e.g., serotonin and
352 dopamine [16]). They have also recommended the use of cognitive behavioural
353 therapies to disrupt the spiral of self-defeating actions typical of depression [16], or to
354 construct new prediction signals that modify the gain on prediction errors via the
355 salience network [14]. Our own model adds to this work by emphasising the need to
356 facilitate adaptive responses to social stress. This could well explain the efficacy of
357 interpersonal psychotherapy as a treatment for major depressive disorder [67], and
358 highlights the value of prevention and early intervention efforts that reduce
359 vulnerability by targeting modifiable risk factors in the social environment. **Given the**
360 **heterogeneous nature of depression, we also recommend the development of**
361 **(computational) diagnostic tools capable of distinguishing between social and non-**
362 **social forms in order to inform treatment decisions.** Finally, simply having a positive
363 and principled framework within which to understand depression – and the rationale
364 for therapeutic interventions – is likely to be helpful for those seeking treatment. Our

365 synthesis can be used to help clients understand why they have depression, and to
366 explain why, for example, it might be useful to combine interpersonal psychotherapy
367 with antidepressants.

368

369 **Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank Lucy Morrish, Jakob Hohwy, Alex
370 Fornito, Rebecca Schwarzlose and three anonymous reviewers for their valuable
371 contributions. Karl Friston is funded by the Wellcome Trust; Christopher Davey and
372 Sarah Whittle are both funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council
373 of Australia (NHMRC).

374 **Glossary**

375 **Active inference:** A corollary of the free-energy principle, which states that we
376 minimise surprise (i.e., prediction errors) by changing our predictions (i.e.,
377 perception) or by acting upon the world to elicit sensations that conform to
378 predictions (i.e., action).

379 **Adaptive prior:** A prior endowed by evolution to underwrite adaptive fitness.

380 **Association cortex:** Regions of the cerebral cortex that are not primary sensory or
381 motor projection areas, including the prefrontal cortex, and extensive parts of the
382 temporal, parietal and occipital cortices..

383 **Empirical priors:** Priors found in hierarchical models that can be learned or inferred
384 under priors from the level above.

385 **Entropy:** The uncertainty or average surprise associated with outcomes sampled from
386 a probability distribution. A distribution with low entropy means, on average, that the
387 outcome is relatively predictable.

388 **Evolutionary systems theory:** A multidisciplinary paradigm that explains dynamic,
389 evolving systems in terms of co-action between self-organisation and general
390 selection (e.g., natural selection) over time. This produces complex adaptive systems,
391 like the brain, that adapt to the environment through an autonomous process of
392 selection that recruits the outcomes of locally interacting components within that
393 system to select a subset of those components for replication or enhancement.

394 **Free-energy principle:** A generalisation of predictive coding that asserts that
395 organisms actively minimise an upper bound on surprise (i.e., free energy), which,
396 under simplifying assumptions, translates to (precision weighted) prediction error.

397 **Generative Model:** A probabilistic mapping from hidden causes in the environment
398 to observed consequences (sensory data), typically specified in terms of the likelihood
399 of observing some data (given their causes) and priors (on these causes).

400 **Interoception:** The perception and integration of autonomic, hormonal, visceral and
401 immunological (bodily) signals.

402 **Precision:** The inverse variance, volatility, or reliability of a signal. In predictive
403 coding, prediction errors are weighted by precisions that determine the relative
404 influence of bottom-up (error) and top-down (representation) signals (e.g., a high
405 precision on error signals corresponds to low confidence in top-down beliefs).
406 Dynamic precision weighting is mediated by neuromodulation and underwrites
407 psychological processes such as attentional selection and sensory attenuation.

408 **Predictive coding:** A processing scheme for inferring the likely causes of sensory
409 data by minimising prediction error. Typically, this entails a hierarchical generative
410 model (e.g., the brain) in which top-down signals convey predictions and bottom-up
411 signals convey (precision weighted) prediction errors.

412 **Prior:** The probability distribution or density on the causes of data that encode beliefs
413 about those causes prior to observing the data.

414 **Surprise:** The negative log probability of sensory experiences encountered by an
415 agent. Also known as surprisal or self-information.

416 **Visceromotor cortex:** Agranular (limbic) regions of isocortex and allocortex that
417 regulate the hormonal, immune and autonomic nervous systems, including the
418 cingulate cortex, the posterior ventral medial prefrontal cortex, the posterior
419 orbitofrontal cortex and ventral portions of the anterior insula.

BOX 1: The Hierarchical Structure of the Brain

In psychology, it has long been recognised that the brain entails a hierarchical structure ranging from highly specialised sensorimotor systems at its lowest levels through to developmentally flexible, highly integrated systems responsible for higher-order executive functions [3, 4]. A hierarchical neural architecture is also emphasised by predictive coding approaches in neuroscience, which explore how the brain minimises prediction error via recurrent message-passing between cortical levels [9, 68, 69]. More recently, imaging studies in network neuroscience have provided direct evidence that the brain exhibits a multiscale hierarchical organisation, with a given node (e.g., network, module or sub-module) itself comprising a network of smaller interacting nodes at a lower level [68, 70] (see Figure I).

Comparative work suggests that a **hierarchical architecture** is a hallmark of the mammalian brain, progressing from highly segregated sensorimotor hierarchies common to all mammals through to the cortical association areas that confer the adaptive advantage of heightened cognitive control among primates [71, 72]. Again, this structure is thought to exemplify the complementary relationship between evolution and development – selection has canalised early sensorimotor regions that serve as neurodevelopmental anchors, allowing for the progressive, activity-dependent self-organisation of widely distributed association networks that lie furthest from sensory patterning centres [71, 73]. This neuroplasticity enhances adaptability by producing higher-order, “domain-general” faculties that are able to respond flexibly to rapidly changing environments [6, 73].

444 It is now broadly accepted that a hierarchical neural structure is favoured by selection.
445 It enhances evolvability because deleterious changes to a single component of the
446 system are unlikely to affect the system itself, and it allows adaptive novelties to
447 emerge without disrupting global functioning [70]. Computer simulations of evolving
448 networks have also shown that selection favours a hierarchical organisation because it
449 conserves the (spatial, processing and metabolic) cost of neural connections; improves
450 problem-solving by recursively combining solutions to sub-problems; and adapts
451 more rapidly to new environments than non-hierarchical structures [74]. Finally, the
452 hierarchical brain is thought to promote “self-organised criticality”. This is a
453 dynamical state poised between completely ordered, stable cycles of activity and
454 highly complex, chaotic ones that optimises evolvability because it allows small
455 extrinsic changes to elicit large intrinsic reorganisations. The hierarchical segregation
456 of neural networks into distributed neighbourhoods has been found to stretch the
457 parameter range for self-organised criticality by allowing subcritical and supercritical
458 dynamics to co-exist simultaneously [75]. Since systems at criticality have optimal
459 information-processing capacities, a structure that extends this critical region is likely
460 to be naturally selected [76].

BOX 2: The Free-Energy Principle

The FEP seeks to explain how biological systems maintain their integrity by occupying a constricted number of states [5]. It suggests that all organisms actively reduce the entropy (i.e. disorder or dispersion) of their sensory and physical states by minimising free-energy. Borrowed from statistical thermodynamics and machine learning, free-energy is an information theory quantity which limits (by being greater than) the entropy of a brain's sensations or sensory samples from the environment. In this context, entropy (the mathematical description of uncertainty) refers to the (long-term) average of surprise: a statistical concept referring to the negative log probability of sensory samples encountered by an agent. This probability is also known as (Bayesian) model evidence.

These principles have important implications for understanding how biotic agents work. Because the repertoire of states an organism occupies is limited, the probability of these states has low entropy (i.e., surprise). Thus, an organism's distal imperative of maintaining functional states within physiological bounds (i.e., homeostasis) translates into a proximal avoidance of surprise [5]. Surprise itself cannot be evaluated; however, biological systems can minimise surprise vicariously by minimising their free-energy – which roughly translates to prediction error, weighted by its precision.

The FEP appeals to predictive coding by characterising the brain as a hierarchical inference machine that minimises prediction error by seeking to match incoming sensory inputs with top-down predictions [see Figure II]. This occurs in two ways. First, we can improve our predictions by altering internal states (i.e., perception). Second, we can act upon the world to confirm our predictions (i.e., action). Thus,

487 action and perception operate synergistically to optimise an organism's model of the
488 environment. Crucially, to minimise free-energy, the precision of prediction errors
489 also has to be predicted, invoking notions of attentional gain (psychologically) and
490 neuromodulation (physiologically).

491
492 The FEP also applies to the morphology, development and evolution of the brain. It
493 suggests that instead of just containing a model of the world, the brain is a model of
494 the world – a physical transcription of causal regularities in the environment that is
495 optimised by evolution. This model instantiates genetically specified (empirical) prior
496 beliefs that have minimised free-energy (i.e., maximised model evidence) over
497 evolutionary time by ensuring an organism seeks out a small number of unsurprising
498 states that are consistent with its phenotype and environment. In other words, natural
499 selection is nature's way of performing Bayesian model selection to minimise the
500 (variational) free energy of phenotypes (i.e., generative models).

Box 4: The Adolescent Brain and Risk for Depression

The brain undergoes significant maturation in adolescence, involving processes that begin with puberty and continue until a young person is in their mid-to-late twenties [77]. Over this period, there is a progressive increase in white matter, alongside synaptic pruning and grey matter loss, which have the effect of delineating more clearly defined large-scale brain networks [78]. Subcortical regions, including the primary components of the reward system, undergo more rapid maturation [79], while the most prolonged development is in association cortex, including prefrontal regions that are implicated in social processing [78, 80].

It is now widely accepted that the functional and structural changes that accompany adolescence reflect a particularly sensitive period for adapting to the social world. Brain imaging studies show that adolescence is typified by significant alterations in social and affective processing systems, which are thought to increase risk for mood disorder by heightening sensitivity to social threats in this period [41, 80-82]. Coincident with these neurodevelopmental processes, there are also substantial changes in the adolescent social environment. Peer relationships become increasingly important, hierarchical and complex, and there is significant socio-environmental volatility – friendships change frequently, and romantic relationships are typically short-lived [83].

It is unsurprising, then, that the period from adolescence to early adulthood is a peak time for the onset of depression [42]. During adolescence, sources of social uncertainty are frequently encountered. Maturation of subcortical regions, along with marked hormonal changes [82, 84], increase sensitivity to affective and self-relevant

528 social cues. Moreover, prefrontal cortical development leads, on the one hand, to
529 improved regulation of affective processes, but on the other, heightens sensitivity to
530 the nuance and complexity of interpersonal relationships [58]. For this reason,
531 increased vulnerability to depression starts in puberty but is maintained well beyond
532 adolescence.
533

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