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Mentalization

WHAT IS MENTALIZING?

Mentalizing is to do with how our mind works. It is the way our mind tells us what we are feeling and thinking, and why we are behaving as we are. It is also how our mind tells us what someone else is feeling and thinking and why they are behaving as they are. It is how we experience and understand our relationships with others. In order to have good personal and social relationships with others, it is essential that we understand each other, and ourselves, reasonably accurately. What is going on in our mind to make us feel as we do? What is going on in the other person's mind to make them behave like that?

AUTOMATIC VS. CONTROLLED MENTALIZING

When we interact with others in a spontaneous and natural manner, mentalizing takes place automatically. We do not need to exert ourselves and do not even notice that we are mentalizing. We simply respond to people, taking turns in conversation and in a joint task, by making reasonable assumptions about why people are saying what they are saying or behaving as they are. We feel understood. It is only when people depart from an expected response that we are surprised. We stop and wonder: 'What happened then?' Did he really understand what I meant? That's not what I meant. Let me try one more time'. Then we resort to controlled or explicit mentalizing. We ask a question – 'What made you say that?'

EXTERNAL VS. INTERNAL MENTALIZING

We mostly focus on the eyes and facial expression and tone of voice of others to give us clues about what is going on in their mind. This is an external focus or focus on the outside. From there we 'guess' their inside. To check we are correct, we ask the person, 'Are you feeling [happy, sad, angry, frightened, excited, etc.]?' Some people can be overly concerned about what others are thinking and feeling. This is called hypermentalizing. This happens when people become wary, distrustful or suspicious of other people, even people they do not know. For example, sensitive people, when they are on public transport or in the street, might start to think others are looking at them, noticing them in some way, are against them or even threatening them.

WHY IS MENTALIZING IMPORTANT?

Mentalizing helps us to: (1) have a more accurate understanding of what is taking place between people; (2) understand ourselves, who we are, our preferences, our own values, etc; (3) communicate well with our family and close friends; (4) regulate our own feelings; (5) regulate other

people's feelings; (6) avoid misunderstandings; (7) see the connection between emotions and actions more easily, which will help us to escape destructive patterns of thoughts and feelings.

WHY DO WE SO OFTEN MISUNDERSTAND EACH OTHER?

The mind is hidden – we can never know what is going on in another person's mind unless they tell us.

- Sometimes we cannot even work out what is going on in our own mind
- We tend to guess what is going on in someone else's mind without checking it out
- We decide we know what they are thinking (e.g., we think that others are thinking the same way as we do)
- We make snap decisions: we 'know' what the other person is thinking even if they deny it
- We often assume that others understand us without us having to say what is going on for us ourselves
- Individuals have different experiences of the world, and we sometimes don't like that
- A person who feels threatened holds back feelings and/or thoughts because he or she is afraid of something (such as being embarrassed or judged or humiliated) – this then affects their ability to understand what is going on in their own mind.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHEN WE ARE MENTALIZING?

We can never be 100% sure. But good mentalizing is characterized by a genuine curiosity about the other person's experiences, thoughts and feelings. It is a 'not-knowing' and exploratory attitude. When we are mentalizing, we allow our feelings to happen without trying to get rid of them; we can doubt ourselves and reflect on our thoughts and feelings; we are open to alternatives and can genuinely listen to others.

WHAT ARE TYPICAL SIGNS OF POOR MENTALIZING?

- There are some 'giveaways' that indicate when someone's mentalizing is poor.
- Feeling certain about other people's motives, without considering any possible alternatives
- Thinking in black and white terms
- Not acknowledging feelings in oneself or others (low empathy)
- Overlooking the fact that people influence each other
- Not being curious about what is in someone's mind
- Emphasizing external factors instead of considering personal states – for example, that it was raining, or that one had a headache – or describing a particular situation as being 'just how it was', without being able to give any more explanation
- Using a lot of generalizations, absolute statements and/or oversimplifying. For example, 'All men are…'; 'Obviously this is because…'; 'She is just…'



WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF POOR MENTALIZING?

- Poor mentalizing of our own thoughts and emotions means that we do not have a good understanding of our own reasons for acting the way we do. Instead, things seem to 'just happen'

- Our sense of who we are can become unstable. We may second-guess ourselves, feel insecure or need constant confirmation and reassurance from others

- We misunderstand each other frequently. This can have negative consequences: for example, others may feel overlooked, not heard or wrongly interpreted and become upset about this; or we feel that others do not understand or care about us

- We may react in a very emotional way based on misunderstandings – for example, we may become afraid, angry, disappointed, etc. We can be taken over by emotions or act without thinking (that is, we allow the surrounding circumstances or our own impulses to govern our actions)

FROM MENTALIZING TO SURVIVAL ('FIGHT OR FLIGHT')

Feelings are activated faster and more strongly in some people than others. The fight/flight response can kick in at different times for different people, depending on the individual's personal threshold (the 'switch point'). The time it takes to return to a normal state after intense emotional activation varies among people. These are important points for treatment: emotional intensity can be controlled, the threshold can be raised, and the time it takes before one gets back to one's normal state can be reduced.

WHAT ARE BASIC EMOTIONS?

Basic emotions are emotions that exist in all mammals. Basic emotions are 'wired' in the same area in the brain, trigger the same physical reactions, and each of them is linked to a set pattern of reactions. The seven basic emotions are:

- Interest and curiosity
- Fear
- Anger
- Sexual lust
- Separation anxiety/sadness
- Love/caring
- Play/joy

Social emotions, such as shame and loyalty, exist in humans and some primates.



WHY ARE BASIC EMOTIONS IMPORTANT FOR US?

Basic emotions are related to evolution – they have been shown to be important for survival and reproduction. They represent an innate and automatic preparedness to react in particular ways. We do not need to learn these emotions or reaction patterns because they are determined by nature (although we can still distance ourselves from them, for example, by focusing our mind or by distraction). They supply us with automatic responses that have been important for human survival throughout evolution, over the course of millions of years.

THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE SEVEN BASIC EMOTIONS

Interest and curiosity, or exploratory behavior, motivates us to find out useful information about our surroundings (for example, where is there food and water or a safe place to hide). We need to be curious to learn things about life and each other.

Fear makes us ask ourselves questions such as: 'Is what I am facing dangerous?', 'Can it injure or kill me?', 'Is this person a rival who is stronger than I am?', 'Is he/she an enemy?'. In a situation where the fear becomes intense enough and the enemy or rival seems stronger than us, it prompts our decision to run away or 'give in' to the other person. Fear can also prompt us to freeze or 'play dead' if the threat is overwhelming and our life is at risk.

Anger: If we find that someone or something is standing in our way, we may show anger and see if he/she submits. If the person resists, the intensity of our anger will increase and possibly even lead us to attack them

Sexual lust encourages reproduction – and therefore the continuation of our genes in our children.

Separation anxiety and sadness function as an appeal for others to take care of us. They signal to potential caregivers that we are in danger or in need of protection, or that we have become isolated from our group/family, or that we have lost someone close whom we depend on.

Love/caring motivates us to care for our children, family, partner and friends.

Play/joy stimulates us to interact with others so that we remain a 'pack animal' rather than becoming a hermit. It increases our skills of interacting with others, introduces limits to our own excitement, and enables us as children to develop ways dealing with anger through 'rough-and-tumble' play.

AWARENESS OF EMOTIONS

Because of our upbringing and socialization, we can be distanced from our natural, emotional reactions. Emotions can be suppressed. We can therefore be emotionally triggered, but at the same

time be unaware of what exactly we are feeling. For example, we can feel heart palpitations or bodily unease without knowing why.

HOW DO WE REGISTER EMOTIONS IN OTHERS?

There are two main ways in which we register emotions in others: By interpreting others' facial expressions and body language – this happens across all cultures and, to some extent, in other animal species as well as humans. Through identification – for example, when we see another person feeling sad, we can become sad ourselves. This is part of the basis of empathy. (We have specific brain cells called 'mirror neurons' that enable us to feel and experience what someone else is feeling and experiencing).

HOW DO WE REGISTER EMOTIONS IN OURSELVES?

People differ in how they register their own emotions. Some people find it easier than others. We register our emotions by turning our attention inwards – noticing our bodily reactions, thoughts and feelings. Examples of this in common language include 'a lump in my throat', 'weak at the knees', 'pressure behind the eyes', 'hair standing on end', and so on.

Emotional awareness can be improved with practice, simply by being more aware and 'being more present in one's own body'. Different experiences and emotions can emerge in this exercise. Some people find that their physical experiences block their awareness of their feelings. Others may become anxious or even paranoid about losing control – this is similar to fear, one of the basic emotions.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION THROUGH OTHERS

We can also allow others to help us regulate our emotions. In fact, we often try to do this, such as when we comfort another person who is upset or allow ourselves to be consoled by others. For this to be effective, we need to be willing to let another person comfort us. On the other hand, the way in which this person tries to console us – their behavior and what they say – is also important.

IMPAIRED EMOTIONAL REGULATION

This is when we are stuck in a painful, problematic, uncomfortable and often unclear emotional state. People in this state can resort to dramatic ways (such as getting high or self-harming) to escape it. These emotional states contain unmentalized feelings. While they are in such a state, people can do very irrational and destructive things. It is essential to talk about these experiences in therapy. It is also important to try to reduce the time spent in such states, and therapy can help with this.



WHAT IS A MENTALIZING CULTURE?

A mentalizing culture is a culture within a family or a group where the family/group members frequently have discussions about people and why they behave the way they do. Growing up in a mentalizing culture promotes secure attachment. In turn, this helps a person's mentalizing abilities to develop and be maintained. A mentalizing culture is necessary to manage any significant events that affect anyone in a family. Discussion about experiences need to be done with a reasonable degree of open-mindedness, minimal certainty and without triggering any oppressive family taboos.

ATTACHMENT AND MENTALIZING

Attachment relationships are important. For young children, close attachments with caregivers (such as parents) are very important. These relationships help the child to become aware of his or her own emotional states, to be able to put names to these states, to find out the reasons for them, and to use his or her understanding of emotions to be able to relate to others. If a child's relationship to his or her attachment person(s) is poor, he or she may not be able to use the attachment person to learn how to understand feelings and the relationships between people. This will have negative consequences for the child's mentalizing abilities as he or she grows up and becomes an adult. This means that the person is very much left alone with their emotions. They will also find it difficult to think around the attachment relationship itself, because the person does not have a reliable reference point. However, this can become easier over time if the person has supportive and caring other relationships as they grow up, for example, with a grandparent or teacher.

ATTACHMENT CONFLICT

Attachment conflict means that a person hides or exaggerates signals about their own emotional state because they fear or are insecure about what will happen if they try to get close to the attachment person. Attachment conflict means that an impulse to get closer to someone is inhibited by something else (such as fear of being punished by the other person, or sometimes a wish to punish that person).

VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

It is particularly difficult to think about the primary attachment relationship if this relationship involves violence and sexual abuse. How can someone begin to understand why a person who should be treating them with care and love (such as a parent) is behaving in a way that ignores or actively harms their wellbeing? Attachment conflicts inhibit a child's mentalizing abilities right from the start, and leave behind emotional scars and confusion. They undermine the child's ability to deal with attachment conflicts later in adult life.

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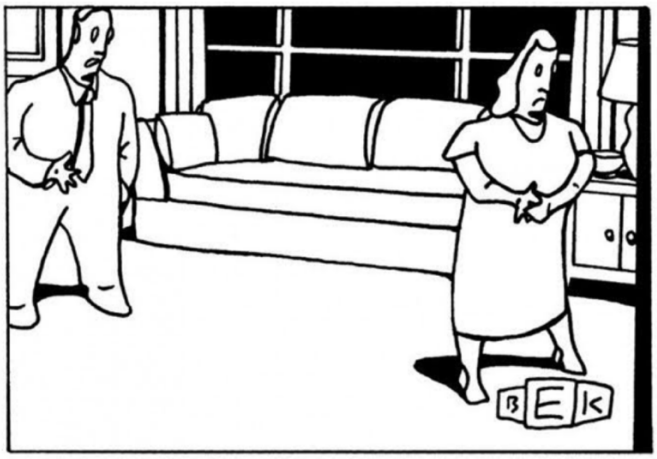
Mentalizing Cheat Sheet

What is a Mentalizing Stance?

- Considering alternative explanations about another person's behavior
- Finding the "grey" area rather than "black and white" thinking
- Acknowledging feelings in someone else
- Acknowledging that people influence each other
- Being curious about what someone else is thinking and feeling
- Considering internal (mind) and external (environmental) factors
- Avoiding generalizations by acknowledging that each individual has a unique experience

What are the Consequences of Mentalizing?

- We have a good understanding of our reasons to acting
- We have a stable sense of self/identity
- We avoid misunderstandings
- We act, rather than react



"Of course I care about how you imagined I thought you perceived I wanted you to feel."