

Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression



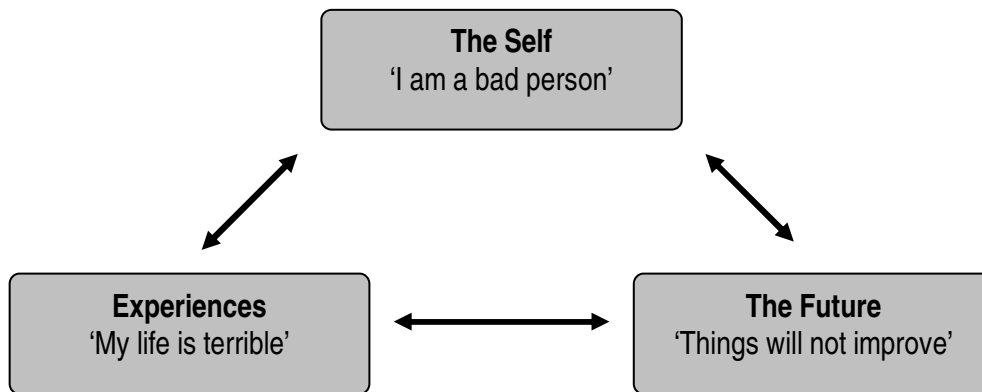
This activity will help you to:

- Understand the cognitive theory of depression
- Apply ideas from this theory to interview data
- Read complex psychological material

According to Beck (e.g. 1996), depression is the result of faulty or maladaptive cognitive processes. The emotional and physical symptoms are a consequence of the thinking patterns that Beck assumes to be the cause of the disorder. Beck's theory of depression has three aspects.

The Cognitive Triad

According to Beck, depressed people have unrealistically negative ways of thinking about themselves, their experiences and their future.



Beck's theory suggests that many of the secondary symptoms of depression can be understood in terms of this core of negative beliefs. For example, a lack of motivation could be the result of a combination of pessimism and helplessness. A person might lose interest in things they used to enjoy if they do not have the expectation that they will feel better by doing them.

Silent Assumptions

Beck believes that the inner life of depressed people is dominated by a set of assumptions that shape conscious cognitions. These assumptions derive ultimately from the messages we receive from parents, friends, teachers and other significant people (intentional or not; we infer them from the way these people talk and behave toward us). The silent assumptions play an important role in making people vulnerable to depression. Examples of silent assumptions might include:

- "I must get people's approval"
- "I must do things perfectly or not at all"
- "I must be valued by others or my life has no meaning"
- "The world must always be just and fair"

These types of belief are not particularly unusual. What makes depression-prone people different is the extent to which they subscribe to them.

Information Processing

A third aspect of Beck's model concerns how depressed people are prone to distorting and misinterpreting information from the world. They are inclined to make overly negative and self-defeating interpretations that lead to low mood and passivity. Common misinterpretations include:

Fault Thinking Strategy	Explanation
Arbitrary inferences	Drawing negative conclusions off the back of insufficient evidence.
Selective thinking	Focusing on negative details or events whilst ignoring positive ones.
Overgeneralisation	Drawing sweeping conclusions based on a single incident.
Catastrophising	Exaggerating a minor setback until it becomes a complete disaster.
Personalising	Taking responsibility and blame for all unpleasant things that happen.
Black and white thinking	Seeing everything in terms of success or failure

What you need to do...

Below is an excerpt from an interview with a depressed patient. Read the excerpt and do the following:

- Identify features of this patient's thinking that illustrate the depressed cognitive triad
- Choose two of the information processing biases explained above, and identify statements from the interview that illustrate the biases.
- Choose two more of the information processing biases, and invent some statements of your own that would illustrate this type of thinking in a depressed patient.

I'm finding it impossible to cope at work. However hard I seem to work it never all gets done and I'm constantly running to stand still. The boss doesn't seem to notice that I'm struggling but then again he doesn't think much of me anyway and if I tell him I can't manage he'll just think I'm even more useless than he does already. I should never have gone for that promotion. I knew I wasn't really up to it. They probably only gave me the job so I'd screw up and they'd have an excuse for firing me. Now I am screwing up and it's hurting the company, the clients are upset and it's all my fault. I should go for another job but with my track record I'd be lucky to end up cleaning the toilets and I've got to think about the mortgage. I suppose I could just jack it all in and say, 'f*** it!' but I can't, I've got my family to think about, God knows I'm a bad enough husband and father as it is.