

# Anxiety Disorders

# 1 Psychosocial Problem

# Psychosocial Problem Theory

- The principles of psychosocial problems and their measurement can be summarized by observing that every psychosocial problem:
  - (a) varies widely in its possible severity in finely graduated increments
  - (b) has a possible severity that includes zero (no problem) then increases in increments of possible severity to as extreme, intense, disabling, frequent, distressing, costly, or otherwise bad as the problem can be

# Psychosocial Problem Theory

- Every psychosocial problem:

(c) is seamlessly **continuous** with the whole psychological person, in whom **no division exists between pathological and normal**; the same universal psychometric principles and the same basic psychobiological dimensions apply whether or not a behavior is judged to be problematical

(d) **can stand alone or in subordinate or superordinate relationship to another problem**

# Psychosocial Problem Theory

- Every psychosocial problem:

(e) is always a single behavior, either a single response per se or multiple defining responses (subordinate behaviors) summed/averaged into a single score

(f) has defining sub-problems (if any) that empirically cohere sufficiently to justify treating their sum/average as a single behavior

# Psychosocial Problem Theory

- Every psychosocial problem:

(g) is measured flexibly, with freedom within psychometrically permissible limits to name and define a problem, to set cut points to its severity dimension, and to dichotomize, truncate, or rescale its dimension as fits the assessment context

(h) is defined only by behaviors it includes; i.e., without exclusion criteria

# Psychosocial Problem Theory

- A psychosocial problem can be indexed as a single behavior or observation
  - For example, a single task performance or a single anxiety rating given during a task
- Often a psychosocial problem is **indexed as the sum of multiple behaviors**

# Troubling Thoughts

- **Aversive intrusive thoughts**, difficult to control or dismiss, can come as **obsessive preoccupations, excessive worries**
- Obsessions and worry are experienced by most people who have no serious problems and can occur in people who fear and avoid regardless of their particular dreaded activities.

(Borkovec, Shadick, & Hopkins, 1991; Frost & Steketee, 2002; Rapee & Barlow, 1991)



# Troubling Thoughts

- Obsessions are intrusive unwanted thoughts, images, or impulses that can be experienced as aversive, alien, or frightening
- Common obsessive themes involve moral, religious, sexual, contamination, disease, symmetry, ordering, and harming concerns
- The relationship between obsessions and compulsions is complex
  - People sometimes engage in compulsive behavior in response to obsession

(Williams, Mugno, Franklin, & Faber, 2013; Yovel, Gershuny, Steketee, Buhlman, Fama, Mitchell, & Wilhelm, 2011)

# Troubling Thoughts

- Troubling thoughts, and even hallucinations and delusions, are common in psychological life generally
- Many patterns of troubled thinking show elements of both worries and obsessions
- **Maladaptive worry is not always sharply distinct from constructive preparatory problem solving, because in both one thinks of possible dangers and how to prevent or manage them**

(Michail & Birchwood, 2009; Vellante, Laro, Cella, Raballo, Petretto, & Preti, 2012)

# Anxiety/Fear

- Nearly everyone has experienced anxiety at first hand
- So it is on a spectrum
- Anxiety has long been a leading proposed cause of phobic **avoidance behavior**, but anxiety is potentially a serious problem in its own right

# Anxiety/Fear: Subjective Anxiety

- Fear in consciousness is difficult to describe, but people can indicate how intensely afraid they feel by rating a simple scale
- **Subjective anxiety has meaning in relation to the psychological context in which people experience it**

# Anxiety/Fear: Panic Anxiety

- **Panic attacks vary in their apparent relationship to circumstances. Some panic attacks seem to come spontaneously, as if uncued**
- People sometimes find panic attacks to be more likely in certain settings

(Barlow, 2002)

# Trait Anxiety

- **Subjective anxiety can be viewed as a transitory feeling state and as an enduring personality trait, a disposition to see circumstances as threatening and to react with fear**
- Trait anxiety is usually measured by asking people to indicate the self-descriptiveness of various brief statements

(Cattell & Scheier, 1961;  
Hersen, 1973)

# Physiological “Anxiety”

- **Autonomic arousal and its associated neurochemical mechanisms**
- **Defining anxiety as ‘physiological arousal’ can be misleading because although people commonly describe fear in part by describing how their heart raced or they began to sweat, their **bodily perceptions** often do not match their actual bodies**

(Hoehn-Saric, McLeod,  
Funderburk, & Kowalski, 2004;  
Andor, Gerlach, & Rist, 2008)

# Anxiety as Perception of Physiological Arousal

- **Physiological arousal per se has less impact on behavior than does the person's perception and **interpretation of physiological arousal****
- **Bodily perceptions can become a focus of obsessive worrying and panic, and can give rise to defensive actions, such as seeking medical help for a racing heart or ritually carrying a bottle of water against a possible dry mouth**

(Andor et al., 2008; Salkovskis & Warwick, 1986)



# Causes of Phobic Avoidance

- Problematic avoidance is especially prominent in phobias so they reveal well its nature and treatment
- Scary verbal information can engender enduring fear (Field & Lawson, 2003)
- **Most phobias lack discrete precipitating circumstances and such circumstances (e.g., a severe automobile crash) typically produce phobias in relatively few people**

# Causes of Phobic Avoidance

- **Phobias, obsessions, and compulsions have complex roots and can be traced to diverse social, psychological, and environmental circumstances.**
- **In the social cognitive approach, historical and biological causes operate mainly via conscious cognitive processes that prompt and sustain avoidance behavior in the here and now**

(Iervolino et al, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Van Houtem, Laine, Boomsma, Ligthart, van Wijk, & De Jongh, 2013)

# Anxiety theory of avoidance

- Two-factor theory (Mowrer, 1960):
  - Anxiety comes to control avoidant behavior in a two-part process of **classical conditioning plus operant conditioning**
  - First, the person learns by classical conditioning to be afraid of a previously neutral stimulus, after having experienced it paired with an aversive stimulus
  - Second, the anxiety provoked by the now-conditioned former neutral stimulus motivates the person to avoid that stimulus, which avoidance is rewarded (operant conditioning) by the decline in anxiety

# Perceived Danger

- The perceived likelihood, from 0% to 100%, of a harmful outcome resulting from a given action
- Such perceptions of danger are held mainly responsible for the avoidance, fear, and other problems seen in phobia, panic, obsession, and compulsion.

Beck, 1976; Clark, 1999; Salkovskis, 1996; Williams & Watson, 1985)

# Anticipated Panic

- The likelihood from 0% to 100%, that doing a task would result in a panic attack
- Such anticipated distress has been proposed to underlie dysfunctional avoidance.

(Williams, 1996; Smits,  
Powers, Cho, & Telch, 2004)

# Perceived Self-Efficacy

- One's perceived ability to execute an action or a pattern of thought
- The sole question is the extent the person thinks she or he can perform particular actions, overtly in behavior or in the case of thought control self-efficacy, covertly in consciousness

(Bandura, 1997; Maddux, 1995; Williams, 1996)

# Perceived self-efficacy

- Self-efficacy theory holds that avoidance, fear, and scary thoughts arise towards an object or activity largely because people have a diminished sense that they can act effectively and **remain in control** of circumstances and of themselves

# Social cognitive causes of anxiety

- Seeing oneself as vulnerable to anxiety (or to panic) causes one to actually experience anxiety
- People can express high self-efficacy for doing a task but high anticipated anxiety for it as well, in which case they are likely to do the task without great difficulty but with high anxiety

(Williams, 1995)



# Cognitive Processing Bias Causes of Anxiety

- Information processing approaches attribute anxiety partly to cognitive biases in anxious people's
  - attention to
  - perception of
  - interpretation of
  - and memory for fear-related information
- As well as biases in the contents of troubling thoughts and ruminations, compared with non-anxious people

(Mathews & McLeod, 2005; McNally, 1999; Mitte, 2008 Van Bockstaele, Verschuere, Tibboel, De Houwer, Crombez, & Koster, 2013)

# Causes of Panic Attacks

- Psychological models of panic generally conceive it as resulting from perception of threat
  - In particular, a vicious cycle of
  - perceiving bodily sensations,
  - interpreting them **catastrophically**,
  - therefore feeling afraid and apprehensive,
  - which provokes more bodily sensations to be interpreted catastrophically
- A self-efficacy analysis also emphasizes the sense of control
  - That one can prevent panic, can influence thoughts that otherwise lead to panic, and if necessary manage well despite panic

(Beck et al., 1985; Clark, 1986; Rapee, 1993; Williams & LaBerge, 1994)

# Troubling Thoughts

- Social cognitive theories hold that troubling thoughts such as obsessions and worries occur in the normal stream of consciousness but become problematic as people interpret and respond to them maladaptively
- Recent theorizing has emphasized an excessive sense of responsibility for preventing potential harmful effects and a corresponding impulse to take neutralizing actions

# Troubling Thoughts

- When people try to avoid or suppress a bothersome intrusion, their neutralizing rituals can increase the thought's frequency and undermine the sense of control, increasing anxiety and spurring greater efforts to exert control, continuing in a vicious cycle.

# Troubling Thoughts

- Whether worries and obsessions become problems depends partly on their perceived controllability and the person's self-efficacy to manage worrisome future possibilities

(Borkovec et al., 1991; Grisham & Williams, 2009; Stapinski, Abbott, & Rapee, 2010)

# Anxiety Summary

- Future Thinking
- Encoding/attentional bias
- Interpretative bias (misinterpretation of physiological arousal)
- Conscious cognitive bias (catastrophizing)
- Avoidant coping and conditioning