

Cognitive *focus*

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Happenings

Making changes on the fly

Thought Catching Records (TCR) are used in Cognitive Therapy. Normally requiring a form on paper, the TCR is often completed some time after an upsetting event. It relies on having the form available and accurate memory.

Our customized TCRs are now available to our clients on a mobile device, cell phone or tablet through private access to our website: ocbt.ca. The TCRs are stored and available to clients and their therapist through high level digitally secure connections.

Freeing clients to complete their TCRs privately, when the distressing events occur, enhances the effectiveness of using the TCR.

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Loneliness

What happens to us, and what we can do about loneliness?



Humans are social beings. To function well in a socially complex world, there are many challenges to overcome and the challenges keep changing throughout our lives. Having great social experiences and really good long-term relationships, are reported by people to be among our most consistent sources of happiness. A very positive social environment at work is a major factor in job satisfaction. On the flip side, loneliness and social isolation are painful and a major hazard to long term health and happiness.

Everyone feels better when they are approved, than when rejected. Primitive mechanisms in the brain naturally respond to activate these feelings and actually influence how we subsequently view the social world around us.

Centre for
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Popularity

Most of us view some level of social popularity as positive. However there is more than one form of popularity, and the elements that contribute to popularity change at different stages of life.

There is a general tendency for pre-pubertal children to be popular among their peers if they are viewed positively by teachers, coaches or other significant adults. In high school this changes dramatically and the same association with teachers or significant adults becomes a social liability.

One form of popularity is based on status. In high school, good looks, clothing style and athletic success are among some of the many factors that can lead to high status and apparent social popularity. In adulthood wealth, power and influence may confer high status and a large social network.

Although popularity based on status leads to a larger social network, status is not as rewarding to health and happiness as simply being likeable. Likeable people may form fewer, but closer, more intimate friendships, that last longer. Likeable people suffer fewer problems and experience greater health and happiness. Becoming more likeable is possible, and has major benefits. Specific shifts in certain social cognitions make a good start.

Rejection and feeling lonely are actually painful and hazardous to our health. The brains of people who feel lonely have been studied using functional MRIs (fMRI). The same region of the brain that is responsible for physical pain (dorsal anterior cingulate cortex) is activated when we feel lonely, or rejected. We can feel lonely and alienated even if we are around others, if we are not connecting. The perception of exclusion, activates stress hormones and alters both immune function and cardiovascular function. Chronic loneliness is one of the highest risk factors for all mental health problems and is considered as great a risk to physical health as smoking.

In laboratory studies, scientists have created scenarios to make people feel they have been socially rejected. In one study they were given (false) feedback about their personality tests, telling some subjects their personality meant they had a future of being alone, failed marriages etc. (others were told they were accident prone). Thinking they would be lonely in the future impaired their ability to pay attention and to complete arithmetic, spatial and verbal tasks.

Feeling lonely changes our response to social interactions. We become more vigilant for subtle signs of exclusion or rejection, but less attentive to signs of inclusion. Normally enjoyable social interactions become less enjoyable for the lonely. When lonely, we become less socially engaged. This can be detected by others and they may become less likely to engage with us, thinking we are not interested. This often creates a very negative feedback loop. Studies indicate that lonely people do not spend more time alone than others but connect less effectively. Furthermore they do not generally have deficient social skills, but they do become less likely to use those skills.

It is important to recognize that once loneliness seeps into our lives, it becomes harder to seek opportunities for, and engage in social behaviour. Reluctance to socially engage, generally comes from altered social cognitions, not deficient skills, lack of opportunity or personality. Often we will continue these patterns and start to develop feelings of helplessness. The notion that nothing will change, so why bother, frequently develops. On the other hand, starting with small steps and a willingness to experiment can serve to start a process that breaks these cycles and encourages changing the social cognitions that hold us back.