Module 2 – Mentalizing

It is thought that the human brain is essentially made up of three different brain structures: the **brainstem**, the **limbic system** and the **cortex**.

1. **The brainstem**: The reptilian or primitive part of the brain.

   This part of the brain is responsible for controlling our **basic, vital body functions**, such as breathing and heart rate. It allows us to react *instinctively* to avoid danger, find food, and procreate.

   The brainstem is the first brain structure to develop.

2. **The limbic system (including the amygdala and hippocampus)**: The emotional part of the brain.

   The limbic system is at the centre of our *emotions* – monitoring, understanding and building emotional connections. This system develops during adolescence. Adolescents have lots of emotions, which they sometimes struggle to control! The control or brake for the emotions is the **frontal lobe/prefrontal cortex**.

3. **The frontal lobe/prefrontal cortex**: The analytical part of the brain.

   The cortex interprets and makes sense of feelings, emotions and situations that occur. It is responsible for reflecting on and processing information. This area is influenced by environment and educational experience during childhood and throughout adolescence.

**Mentalizing**

As the brain develops, it creates memories and uses these as **templates** to interpret other experiences and direct our behaviour. If we never reflect on these templates or check their accuracy, they get stronger. However, if we do reflect, they can be changed, releasing painful past experiences.

Mentalizing is this ability to *reflect on the emotional, instinctive responses in ourselves and others*. When we start to mentalize, our thinking processes move from the primitive and emotional parts of the brain to the analytical, reflective brain.
The ability to mentalize emerges more fully at around 4 years of age, when a child starts to recognize more easily that a person may think and feel differently from him/herself and can start to problem solve, accounting for others’ perspectives and views.

Sometimes, children aren’t shown effective ways of managing their emotions or do not develop them because of their temperament. As a result, their ‘templates’ for managing emotions can be inadequate and their ways of responding can be ineffective (especially in times of crisis and perceived threat).

Mentalizing is disrupted by stressful situations. People without effective templates can use other coping mechanisms, such as self-harm, substance abuse and impulsive behaviour, to manage stress. Sometimes, this can further stop mentalizing/reflecting, making the emotional and primitive parts of the brain more active and dominant.

In stressful situations, people with BPD tend to ‘lose’ mentalizing, and in doing so make others ‘lose’ mentalizing.

Two concepts that go hand in hand with mentalizing are empathy and mindfulness.

**Empathy** is sensing feelings and emotions in others and attempting to understand them, even if we disagree or feel differently. It has two sides: Tuning in and imagination:

- **Tuning in** is the intuitive ability to read facial expressions and body language. Humans have special ‘mirror neurons’ in the brain that react when watching someone do something. This allows us to perceive the person’s thoughts.

- **Imagination** is ‘putting our self in someone else’s shoes’, suspending our own view of the world and thinking of how they may be experiencing something.

Another concept, mindfulness, originated from Buddhism. Mindfulness describes a skill of having enhanced attention to, and awareness of, a current experience. It requires a person to be open to sensations without judging or coming to conclusions about them. It allows a person to mentalize by focusing the mind.

Mindfulness aids mentalizing by helping to put a ‘pause’ between our thoughts, feelings and actions.

The difference between mentalizing and mindfulness is that mindfulness is about our own mind, whereas mentalizing accounts for both our own and others’ states of mind. When someone is mindful of another mind, they are mentalizing. **Mindfulness will be further discussed in Module 3.**

Mentalizing and mindfulness of a current experience requires the ability to rapidly shift focus from full participation to stepping back to allow observation and reflection, and then returning to participate again (a ‘self-reflection loop’).
The Oxford English Dictionary gives two definitions of the word **mentalize**:

1) To construct or picture in the mind, to imagine, or to give a mental quality to.

2) To develop or cultivate mentally or to stimulate the mind of.

**What happens when you are not able to mentalize?**

There can be no true **communication** and **understanding** in relationships without mentalizing, and no personal security, if we aren’t aware of how we feel, or if we lose sight or another person’s mind and motives.

Uncertainty makes us anxious and wary, and inability to ‘read people’ makes us uncomfortable, suspicious and mistrustful.

Maintaining mentalizing is therefore vital for **mental health**, **social functioning** and intimate **relationships**, yet it is easily lost in stressful situations. As mentioned earlier, this is particularly the case for people with BPD.

Mentalizing is a **curiosity** about our own and someone else’s experiences, thoughts and feelings; treating our interpretation as a ‘best guess’ without making assumptions. Mentalizing is like story telling: it involves coming up with fresh viewpoints and making sense of situations. It requires making an effort and thinking beyond the surface, with a willingness to question our understanding.

**Aspects of mentalizing:**

- **Curiosity**: Being genuinely interested in others’ thoughts and emotions, and respectful of their perspective. Being open to discovery about the other person, and reluctant to make assumptions or to hold on to prejudices about what they think or feel.

- **Being safe in uncertainty**: Acknowledging that you can only imagine or make an informed guess about what others are thinking. Being uncertain is safe, as you are edging towards greater clarity.

- **Reflective contemplation**: A reflective, relaxed and open approach, rather than a controlled and compulsive pursuit of how others think and feel.

- **Perspective taking**: Acceptance that a shared experience can look very different from different perspectives, reflecting an individual’s different experiences and past. Some people are more sensitive or aware of things than others because of previous experience.
• **Forgiveness**: Understanding the actions of others and accepting them as they are.

• **Impact awareness**: Appreciating how your thoughts, emotions and actions may affect others.

• **A trusting attitude**.

• **Humility**: Knowing and understanding someone else and therefore willingness to learn from others regardless of their status.

• **Playfulness and humour**: May be an expression of humility.

• **Willingness to take turns**: ‘Give and take’ in interactions, including the ability to explain openly in the hope of being understood.

• **Belief in changeability**: Minds can be changed and therefore so can people’s behaviour.

• **Assuming responsibility and accepting accountability**: Your actions are generated by your thoughts, emotions, wishes, beliefs and desires, whether or not you are fully conscious about this at the time.

• **Patience**

• **Questioning**: Ask for descriptions of the other person’s experience, i.e. ‘What?’ rather than ‘Why?’

• **Avoid needing to understand**.

• **Avoid needing to be right**: If you can’t agree, try to accept that the other person’s experience is equally valid.

• **Avoid telling someone what they feel and why they are like they are**: It is better to speak about your own perspective (a person with BPD may do this, but don’t get drawn in).

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**How to recognize if someone is not mentalizing, and how to use an imaginary ‘pause button’ to help the situation**

They may become excessively angry or appear unreasonably upset, responding inappropriately. You might react to this with an equally emotional response. At this point, press the imaginary ‘pause’ button. If possible, then ‘rewind’ your mind to a point when you were thinking clearly and were less emotional – step back from the situation.
When trying to read people, we can focus on external cues – their facial expression, tone of voice, body posture – to indicate what they might be thinking. This is called **external mentalizing**. However, sometimes cues can be misleading, and we shouldn’t make assumptions purely on observations. Relying only on what you see and hear lowers the accuracy of mentalizing.

People with BPD use external mentalizing but can be very **sensitive** to facial expressions and eye movements, and tend to **assume** underlying states of mind rather than checking them.

When we aren’t mentalizing, we become occupied with **rules** and responsibilities, ‘shoulds’ and ‘should nots’; we deny our involvement in a problem, **blaming** and engaging in fault-finding; and we start becoming uncertain about our thoughts or the feelings of others. If this happens, it can help if you mentally press the ‘**pause**’ button and try to ‘**rewind**’ the conversation.

**How to talk to someone who is not mentalizing:**

1) Try to **focus** on what is going on for **them**.

2) **Do not react** to what is going on in you.

3) Ask yourself ‘What is happening for **them** right now?’

4) Suggest that **you may be doing something** that is creating their state of mind.

5) Suggest that you would like to understand things from their point of view but it is difficult if they keep shouting etc.

6) Say that you cannot think when they are shouting etc.

7) Suggest a few minutes **time out** to go back to Step 1, asking what is going on for **them**.

8) When you begin to appreciate their state of mind, make sure you say so.

**Additional stages:** How mentalizing can help you cope

**Resolve conflicts** using aspects of mentalizing listed above (Module 5 on Problem Solving will cover more of this).

Establish your level of **tolerance**: Choose a calm time to establish your limits and let your expectations be known. Do not express threats. Listen carefully to their response.