Unit 2 | Treating Mental Illness

Behavioural approach to treating mental illness

Behaviourism

There are various approaches in psychology – basically these are different views on what ‘makes people tick’. Behaviourism is one of these approaches and you may already have learned something about it in the Section on Learning in Unit 1.

Behaviourism is based on the idea that all our behaviour can be explained by what we have learned. The basic idea with respect to mental illness is that mentally disordered behaviour has been learned like any other behaviour. It therefore follows, that the disturbed behaviour can be suppressed by learning new behaviour. You need to know and understand three types of treatment from the behavioural approach: systematic desensitisation, implosion and flooding.

Each of the three treatments is based on classical conditioning. This is defined as learning that occurs when an automatic response is given to a previously unlearned/unrelated stimulus. As you may have learned already (section on learning in unit 1) classical conditioning is a form of learning based on an association (or link) between two stimuli. For example, if you were bitten by a friend's dog, it is likely that you would be reluctant to visit that friend's house again. And if you were bitten by another dog, it is possible that you would fear all dogs.

A phobia is an anxiety disorder where there is a persistent and unreasonable fear of an object or situation which affects the everyday life of the individual. Two examples are agoraphobia which is a fear of open and public places; and arachnophobia which is a fear of spiders.

The three treatments, systematic desensitisation, implosion and flooding, are examples of counterconditioning – being taught a new association to the feared object or situation. The individual has learned to associate the feared object (e.g. dogs) or situation (e.g. being in a lift) with anxiety. The treatment works by teaching the individual relaxation techniques so that the feared object or situation becomes associated with relaxation.
Systematic desensitisation - a behavioural therapy originally developed by Wolpe in the 1950s that uses relaxation techniques to resolve a phobia gradually in small steps. The treatment depends on developing a desensitisation hierarchy. This is a series of gradual steps that are agreed at the start of the therapy between the individual and the therapist.

For example:

- step 1: an individual is taught how to relax completely.
- step 2: the therapist and individual agree on the series of imagined scenes with the feared object or situation. Each scene will cause more anxiety than the previous one.
- step 3: while being completely relaxed, the individual gradually works their way through the first scene.
- step 4: once a step is achieved (the individual can remain relaxed whilst encountering the feared object or situation), then the next scene is imagined.
- step 5: the individual eventually masters the feared object or situation. So now, for example, the individual can meet a dog or travel in a lift without anxiety.

Implosion/flooding: using relaxation techniques similar to systematic desensitisation, these therapies resolve phobias by confronting the fear until the fear subsides. Implosion involves imagining the feared situation whereas flooding involves actually being in the feared situation, for example, actually standing on top of a high building when frightened of heights.

Overall evaluation

Positive points:
- very effectively used for treating phobias
- few, if any, side effects.

Negative points:
- very expensive as a qualified therapist must be used
- treatment takes a long time to work
- causes panic even though it is a controlled situation
- time consuming for the patient (disrupts 'normal' day to day life)
- limited to treating phobias and addictions
- as an alternative way of treating a wide range of mental illnesses, the biological approach (especially chemotherapy) is seen as more effective than systematic desensitisation, implosion and flooding.