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Psychology – Beck's Theory of Depression

Beck (1967), although trained as a psychoanalyst, was struck by the negative thinking shown by depressed clients and developed his own explanation. He suggested the following:

- Negative cognitive triad underlies depression:
 - 1) Negative views of the self as worthless and helpless;
 - 2) Negative views of the world as full of obstacles;
 - 3) Negative views about the future as continuing in much the same way.
- Thinking is biased towards negative interpretations
- Negative schemas acquired in childhood or adolescence
- Forms a "default schema" when any new situation is encountered which is in some way similar to that which created the schema initially
- Negative schemas acquired through:
 - 1) Loss of parent
 - 2) Series of tragedies
 - 3) Rejection by peers
- Schemas fuelled by cognitive biases which people use to interpret reality:
 - 1) Ineptness
 - 2) Self blame
 - 3) Negative self evaluation
- A series of cognitive distortions:
 - 1) Arbitrary inference – drawing conclusions on the basis of insufficient or irrelevant evidence: for example, thinking you are worthless because an open-air concert you were going to see has been rained off.
 - 2) Selective abstraction – focusing on a single aspect of a situation and ignoring others: for example, you feel responsible for your team losing a football match even though you are just one off the players on the field.
 - 3) Overgeneralisation – making a sweeping conclusion on the basis of a single event: for example, you get a D for an exam when you normally get straight As and you therefore think you are stupid.
 - 4) Magnification and minimisation – exaggerating or underplaying the significance of an event: for example, you scrape a bit of paintwork on your car and therefore see yourself as a totally awful driver; you get praised by your teachers for an excellent term's work, but you see this as trivial.
 - 5) Personalisation – attributing the negative feelings of others to yourself. For example, your teacher looks really cross when she comes into the room, so she must be cross with you.

Personality Types

Beck has adapted his theory over time and one important modification concerns personality differences. He thought that there are individual differences that determine the types of event that can trigger depressive episodes. For example, he identified the "sociotropic personality" type, where a person bases their self-esteem on the approval and regard of others. For this kind of person, a perceived snub from a colleague, neighbour, boss etc., might be enough to instigate depressive thoughts. The "autonomous personality" type, on the other hand, would react badly to a situation where their sense of achievement or independence has been challenged e.g. losing a game of tennis or having a decision overruled at work.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Beck's Theory

Strengths	Weaknesses
Depressed people judge themselves in biased ways – Beck's clinical observations	Longitudinal studies show no causal role for cognition
Questionnaires do show cognitive biases, negative automatic thoughts – "Why me?"	Validity of measurement
Negative thinking does decrease after treatment	Contradictory findings
Negative schemas on perception and recollection of information	Cognitive distortions cause or effect?