

SHRINKTIONARY

Psychology Terms: Quick Reference

Plain-English definitions for every psychology terms term on Shrinktionary, in one printable sheet.

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Created and reviewed under the direction of Shariq Refai, MD, MBA, FAPA, a board certified psychiatrist.

Please read

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Anxious attachment

Also: anxious-preoccupied attachment

Anxious attachment is a relationship style marked by a strong fear of being left and a deep need for reassurance. It's an attachment pattern from attachment theory, not a diagnosis.

Attachment

Also: Attachment style

Attachment is the emotional bond that forms between a child and their main caregivers. The patterns set early on can shape how a person relates to others later in life.

Avoidant attachment

Also: dismissive-avoidant attachment

Avoidant attachment is a relationship style marked by strong self-reliance and discomfort with closeness. It's an attachment pattern from attachment theory, not a diagnosis.

Classical Conditioning

Also: Pavlovian conditioning

Classical conditioning is learning by association, where a neutral cue gets paired with something meaningful until the cue alone triggers a response. It helps explain how some fears and phobias form.

Cognitive Distortion

Also: Thinking trap, Unhelpful thinking style

A cognitive distortion is a habitual, biased way of thinking that paints a situation as worse or more extreme than it really is. These patterns are a main target of cognitive behavioral therapy.

Cognitive Flexibility

Also: mental flexibility

Cognitive flexibility is the mental ability to shift thinking, adapt to change, and switch between ideas or tasks. It's a core part of executive function.

Defense Mechanism

Also: ego defense

A defense mechanism is an unconscious mental strategy the mind uses to protect itself from anxiety, conflict, or distressing thoughts. Common examples include denial, projection, and rationalization.

Emotional Dysregulation

Emotional dysregulation is difficulty managing the intensity, duration, or timing of emotions. It's a feature of several conditions rather than a standalone diagnosis.

Emotional Regulation

Also: Emotion regulation, Affect regulation

Emotional regulation is the ability to influence which emotions you feel, how strongly you feel them, and how you express them. It is a major focus of dialectical behavior therapy.

Executive function

Executive function is the set of mental skills that lets you plan, focus, switch tasks, hold information in mind, and resist distraction. It's how the brain runs the day.

Habituation

Also: getting used to it

Habituation is when your response to something fades after you're exposed to it again and again. The brain learns it can stop reacting.

Inhibition

Also: Inhibitory control, Response inhibition

Inhibition is the mental skill of holding back an automatic response, resisting a distraction, or stopping an impulse. It's one of the core components of executive function.

Intergenerational Trauma

Also: Transgenerational trauma, Generational trauma

Intergenerational trauma is the passing of the effects of trauma from one generation to the next through behavior, relationships, and environment. It's a described concept, not a formal diagnosis.

Learned Helplessness

Also: Helplessness response

Learned helplessness is what happens when repeated, uncontrollable stress teaches a person or animal to stop trying, even once escape becomes possible. It's closely linked to depression.

Locus of Control

Also: sense of control

Locus of control is how much you believe you can shape what happens to you. Some people feel in charge of outcomes; others feel life mostly happens to them.

Metacognition

Also: thinking about thinking

Metacognition is thinking about your own thinking. It's the ability to notice, monitor, and adjust how your mind is working.

Motivation

Also: drive

Motivation is what gets you to start, keep going, and put effort into something. It's the why behind your actions.

Operant Conditioning

Also: Instrumental conditioning

Operant conditioning is learning through consequences. Behaviors that get rewarded tend to happen more often, and behaviors that get punished tend to happen less.

Reinforcement

Also: Operant reinforcement

Reinforcement is any consequence that makes a behavior more likely to happen again. It is one of the core ideas behind how learning works and a building block of behavioral therapy.

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria

Also: RSD

Rejection sensitive dysphoria is an intense, painful reaction to real or perceived rejection, criticism, or failure. It's a described pattern often linked to ADHD, not a standalone diagnosis.

Resilience

Also: psychological resilience

Resilience is the ability to adapt and recover after stress, hardship, or trauma. It's bouncing back, not never falling down.

Secure attachment

Also: secure attachment style

Secure attachment is a relationship style where closeness and independence feel comfortable. It's an attachment pattern from attachment theory, not a diagnosis.

Self-Efficacy

Also: belief in one's own ability

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their own ability to handle a situation or reach a goal. It shapes how much effort people put in and how they respond to setbacks.

Self-Esteem

Also: self-worth

Self-esteem is your overall sense of your own worth, how much you value and respect yourself.

Theory of Mind

Also: mentalizing, perspective-taking

Theory of mind is the ability to understand that other people have their own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that differ from your own.

Validation

Validation is the act of recognizing and accepting another person's feelings or experience as real and understandable. It's a communication and therapy skill, not a diagnosis.

Window of Tolerance

The window of tolerance is the zone of arousal where you can handle stress and stay present without getting overwhelmed or shut down. It's a clinical concept used in trauma and regulation work, not a diagnosis.

Working Memory

Also: Short-term working memory

Working memory is the brain's ability to hold a small amount of information in mind and use it for a short time. It's a core part of executive function and supports everyday tasks like following directions or doing mental math.

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