SHRINKTIONARY

# Psychology Terms: Quick Reference

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

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**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.

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## 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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