



Mentalizing

What is mentalizing?

- Mentalizing is a term used to describe a form of imaginative mental activity involved in how we perceive and understand others and ourselves. It is a mental process of making sense of others and ourselves through understanding the states and mental processes that can be seen and heard, and those that are more hidden or subtle.
- Mentalizing is a capacity that one develops throughout infancy and early childhood. This happens in the context of your relationships with the people who closely care for you. Caregivers who are responsive and make an effort to understand your needs and distress will help you develop the capacity to mentalize. When a caregiver “gets it” or seems to be responding to your feelings, needs, and distress, you learn that your emotions, bodily signals, and even your “self” are important and understandable. As early as in infancy, you also learn to understand that caregiver through their vocal tone, facial expressions, ways of communicating with you, and how they help you to regulate your emotions. Essentially, this means they understand when it is time to help you become calm, soothed, and settled and when it is time to play, roughhouse, and laugh. Through all of these experiences, the child learns that their feelings, thoughts, and even they themselves are okay and understandable.
- When you learn how to mentalize well, you can then think about, reflect on, hold, and explore emotions, thoughts, and mental states. Strong mentalizing capacities are fundamental to a person’s ability to have positive relationships and manage in social environments.
- Strong mentalizing can be seen when someone is easily able to explore their own mental states and has interest in the mental states of others. These individuals understand how mental states change and can integrate thoughts and emotional aspects of themselves and others. They have the ability to regulate their own and other’s distress and to be playful and solve problems through give and take. People who can mentalize well are able to take responsibility and acknowledge their own behaviour. They are curious about other people’s perspectives and are comfortable with uncertainty. As you might imagine, these capacities are essential for a healthy and happy couple relationship.
- Poor mentalizing can be seen when someone is unable to reflect on their own thoughts and feelings and makes automatic assumptions about others that may not be accurate. These people find it very difficult to tolerate and regulate their own or others’ distress, and they tend to be rather rigid and certain about what they and others might be thinking, feeling, and understanding, often without any exploration or discussion. Those who find mentalizing to be difficult tend to become overly focused on the internal or external aspects of themselves and others and find it hard to think about their own and someone else’s perspective at the same



time. For instance, a survivor of childhood trauma might assume that their partner is really angry with them because they are not talking to them. However, instead of asking their partner what is going on or thinking of ways to engage with their partner, they make this assumption based on their partner's external behaviour and then act "accordingly", perhaps by shutting down, becoming afraid of being rejected, or angrily shutting out their partner. However, the partner might in fact be thinking about something that is quite worrisome, like an upcoming mortgage payment, and actually be worried about talking to their partner about it out of a desire to protect them or a fear of getting into a fight. When their partner responds to their silence with silence, this might then "prove" to them that they were right to be silent and avoid the conversation. And in the end, they were both "wrong", and now the couple is further apart and struggling to regulate their emotional distress without being able to talk to one another about the distressing event. Had the couple been able to imagine that there was more than one possible reason for the silence, and had they been able to talk about it, explore together, and solve problems together – both emotion regulation and mentalizing – they would have felt closer to one another instead of feeling so far apart and distressed.

How does trauma impact mentalizing?

- At its most simple, studies suggest that those who have experienced abuse have lower mentalizing capacities.
- This relationship goes two ways:
 - First, trauma can make it very difficult for a child to develop the capacity to mentalize well. For instance, a traumatized or dissociated caregiver sends the message to the child that their internal world is bad or dangerous, through their lack of understanding of their own distressed state and that of the child. This leaves the child feeling disoriented and confused. Also, when traumas occur, a child should be able to turn to their caregiver for soothing, support, and comfort. What then does a child do when the caregiver is the person who inflicts the trauma? Getting closer to the caregiver might lead to more abuse, more distress, and more need.
 - Second, it can also be dangerous for an abused child to mentalize. Not only can it be more dangerous to turn to an abusing caregiver in terms of the potential for more abuse, but mentalizing can also be dangerous for the developing mind of the abused child. Imagine being able to think about what is going on in the mind of the abuser, someone who is intentionally hurting a child physically, sexually, or emotionally. This could be incredibly terrifying and emotionally dangerous for a child. The best defence against this is to avoid thinking about the mind of the abuser altogether. However, this then means that the child never develops these essential skills to build and maintain relationships.



How is mentalizing relevant to couple therapy?

- Mentalizing is an essential capacity for being able to get into and then nurture a healthy romantic relationship. Without being able to reflect upon and tolerate your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and those of your partner, a couple relationship would be very difficult. Mentalizing makes it possible to acknowledge and take responsibility for ourselves in relationships, to have empathy and compassion for each other, to be vulnerable and open, and to have safe and clear boundaries with your partner.
- When people experience trauma in childhood, their mentalizing capacities can either not develop or be damaged. This means that it can be hard for a trauma survivor to think about and understand their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviours as well as those of their partner. If you combine this with difficulties in emotion regulation, it can be very difficult to talk about or navigate difficult or painful issues. At the beginning of a relationship, when things are fresh and there has not been an accumulation of painful hurts or conflicts, things may be somewhat manageable, but as relationships move along, it is inevitable that conflicts will arise, one partner will hurt the other's feelings, and difficult life events will crop up that require the use of these mentalizing and emotion regulation skills.
- Couples that have experienced trauma may find it very difficult to do some of the things that couples need to do to repair hurts and conflicts and just to function day by day. These include being able to help each other feel better and safe with each other, take responsibility for how they impact and affect each other, tolerate that they may not know everything about their partner and their feelings, be curious and playful with and about one another, avoid becoming defensive when important discussions arise, correct and repair misunderstandings, not get stuck when misunderstandings arise, trust one another, and be responsive to one another.

Can mentalizing capacities be developed in adulthood?

- In adulthood, if one has not learned how to mentalize or one's capacity to mentalize was damaged by trauma, it is important to work actively to develop these capacities. Practice is the most important approach to learning these skills.
- With your partner, you can practice these skills in everyday normal situations:
 - You can ask questions of your partner about their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.
 - You can take a moment to share your assumptions about what is happening in that moment, listen actively, and work on changing your assumptions in response to what your partner tells you.
 - You can be curious about what is happening in your own and your partner's mind in response to situations that might have gotten you into conflict in the past, by slowing down, listening, not making assumptions, taking a moment to step away and calm down, coming back together and reflecting on what has just happened, and trying to understand and empathize with your partner even when it is painful or difficult to do so.