

AQA specification Topic 6: Clinical Psychology and Mental Health

- The behavioural, emotional, and cognitive characteristics of phobias, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

◆ Introduction

Psychological disorders such as phobias, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) have their own certain characteristics. These clinical characteristics can be broken down into three different categories: 'behavioural', 'emotional' and 'cognitive'. We will look at each in turn.

◆ Phobia

- **Phobia** is an anxiety disorder – an excessive fear, triggered by an object, place or situation. The strong response of fear is irrational and out of proportion considering the stimulus that is causing the fear-response (e.g. pigeon). There is an overwhelming desire to avoid or escape the situation. Having a phobia is maladaptive because it can be disruptive to everyday life – to functioning adequately.

Behavioural characteristics

- **Avoidance.** People with phobias tend to display avoidance behaviour - they go to a lot of effort to avoid coming into contact with the object or situation they fear. For example, a person with a social phobia will avoid being in large crowds.
- **Panic.** At times people may not be able to avoid their fears and they may find themselves in front of the object or situation they fear. This will often trigger a 'panic' response. This is a fear response that is so intense, it results in a person 'freezing', which is part of the 'fight-or-flight' fear response. The freezing response is an adaptive response to make a predator think that their prey is dead.
- **Disruption of functioning.** Anxiety and avoidance behaviour can affect every day functioning, e.g. not going out/interacting or even going to work. For example, a person with a social phobia will find it hard to socialise with others.

Emotional characteristics

- **Fear/anxiety.** One emotional characteristic of a phobia is fear. When the person is in the presence of, or anticipates, a specific object or situation, they experience fear, which can lead to anxiety.
- **Disproportionate reaction.** Another emotional characteristic of a phobia is that the fear/anxiety is disproportionate. There is an excessive reaction of fear in relation to the danger that the object or situation may cause.

Cognitive characteristics

- **Irrational beliefs:** A cognitive characteristic of a phobia is irrational beliefs. A person will have unfounded, often illogical, thoughts or arguments that exaggerate the danger/risk that the situation or object imposes. They will also be resistant to rational arguments about the fear stimulus (such as 'most dogs are friendly and harmless'). However, the person recognises that their fear is excessive and unreasonable.
- **Selective attention to the phobic stimulus:** If a person with a phobia is presented with an object or situation they fear, they will find it difficult to direct their attention elsewhere. This selective attention will cause them to become fixated on the object they fear, because of their irrational beliefs about the danger posed.

◆ Types of phobias

Phobias can be broken down into three different types.

- **Specific phobia:** the fear of a particular object or situation/environment e.g. spiders, flying, elevators, pigeons, injections or thunderstorms!
- **Social phobia:** the fear of social situations. This is because you are worried about what others might think of you (being evaluated). For example, you may have a fear of public speaking or avoiding social gatherings, e.g. parties, eating with others, meeting other people, and so on.
- **Agoraphobia:** the fear of being in open or crowded places or situations, which often triggers a panic attack/anxiety because the person feels that they are not able to escape or have little control over the situation. This means that the sufferers avoid public and unfamiliar places.

◆ Depression

- **Depression** is a mood disorder. This mental disorder is characterised by lengthy disturbance of low mood and low energy levels (e.g. diminished interest or pleasure in activities). Depression has been called the 'common cold' of psychiatry because it is the most common psychological problem that people face (Seligman, 1973). Below we focus on **unipolar depression** (also known as major depression).

Behavioural characteristics

- **Low energy level:** One behavioural characteristic of depression is an increase in lethargy (lack of energy). Sufferers of depression have reduced energy levels, making them lethargic. In extreme cases, this can be so severe, that the sufferer cannot get out of bed.
- **Changes in sleeping and eating behaviour:** Another behavioural characteristic of depression is a disruption to sleep. Sufferers may experience reduced sleep (insomnia) or an increased need for sleep (hypersomnia). Similarly, eating may increase (comfort eating) or decrease, leading to weight gain or loss. Sleep disturbances result in tiredness and feelings of lethargy (loss of energy) or restlessness.

Emotional characteristics

- **Loss of enthusiasm.** One emotional characteristic of depression is loss of interest. Sufferers of depression lose interest and pleasure in activities and hobbies.
- **Low mood.** Another emotional characteristic of depression negative mood state. Sufferers of depression have a constant overwhelming feeling of sadness, hopelessness, emptiness, worthlessness, and/or inappropriate feelings of guilt.

Cognitive characteristics

- **Poor concentration.** One cognitive characteristic of depression is difficulty in maintaining attention – poor concentration. For example, sufferers may find it harder to stick to a task or make decisions, as they normally would.
- **Negative thoughts.** Another cognitive characteristic of depression is is a negative thoughts. Sufferers are inclined to have an irrational negative view of themselves, the world, and their future. In some extreme cases, sufferers have thoughts of suicide.

◆ Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

- **OCD** is a type of anxiety disorder. It is a common mental health condition where a person has obsessive thoughts (persistent and recurrent thoughts) and compulsive behaviours (repetitive behaviours or mental acts). Obsessive thought often causes distress (e.g. I will catch a virus if I do not wash my hands now), which compels the person to act on their thought and thus help prevent some dreaded event from happening, and this reduces their anxiety.

Cognitive characteristics

- **Obsessive thoughts.** One cognitive characteristic of OCD is obsessive thoughts. These are unwanted thoughts or images that are recurrent (recur over and over again), intrusive or impulsive, and perceived as being inappropriate or forbidden. These thoughts vary considerably from person to person but are always unpleasant and cause anxiety. Some examples of the outcomes of obsessive thoughts are repeated actions of cleaning and hand-washing, checking (e.g. that doors are locked or the gas is turned off), counting, ordering and arranging, hoarding, or repeating words in their head.
- **Self-awareness of irrationality:** Another cognitive characteristic of OCD is the awareness that the behaviour is irrational. Sufferers with OCD acknowledge and understand that their thoughts and behaviours are irrational and are self-created rather than a reflection of reality.

Emotional characteristics

- **Anxiety:** Emotional characteristics of OCD are anxiety and distress. These are created by obsessive thoughts that are inappropriate, forbidden, or excessive and create a high level of anxiety.
- **Disgust:** Another emotional characteristic of OCD is disgust. Obsessional thoughts about cleanliness or contamination can lead to an emotional reaction of disgust ('disgusting'). This drives some people with OCD to wash their hands repeatedly or perform other irrational behaviours to avoid contamination.

Behavioural characteristics

- **Compulsion.** One behavioural characteristic of OCD is compulsive behaviour. This is where a person feels intense and uncontrollable urges to repeat the behaviour or mental act in order to alleviate anxiety. A common example is compulsive handwashing in response to an obsessive fear of catching germs. Carrying out such behaviours helps reduce anxiety.
- **Avoidance.** Another behavioural characteristic of OCD is avoidance behaviour. People with OCD avoid situations/objects that trigger their anxiety. For example, sufferers who are anxious about germs may avoid going anywhere where they may have to use a public toilet.

Practice exam questions

1. Outline two behavioural characteristics of phobias. [4 marks]
2. Outline two emotional characteristics of phobias. [4 marks]
3. Outline two cognitive characteristics of phobias. [4 marks]
4. Outline two behavioural characteristics of depression. [4 marks]
5. Outline two emotional characteristics of depression. [4 marks]
6. Outline two cognitive characteristics of depression. [4 marks]
7. Outline two behavioural characteristics of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). [4 marks]
8. Outline two emotional characteristics of OCD. [5 marks]
9. Outline two cognitive characteristics of OCD. [2 marks]
10. Emma has a fear of bees and has been diagnosed with a phobia. Describe one emotional characteristic Emma might display. [3 marks]