



What is Psychoanalysis?

Psychoanalysis is a theory of the mind and a method of helping people in mental distress. It is based a very simple idea:

HUMAN BEHAVIOUR
is determined by
UNCONSCIOUS MOTIVATIONS
that are the products of
CHILDHOOD ENCOUNTERS
with
LOVE, LOSS,
SEXUALITY AND DEATH

Psychoanalysis was developed in the 1890s by **Sigmund Freud**. Today, it is practiced by thousands of clinicians around the world.

In a psychoanalytic session, the patient is invited to recline on a couch and say whatever comes to mind, without holding back thoughts or memories that seemed unpleasant, trivial or ridiculous. This method is called '**free association**'.

Through free association, unexpected chains of thought can unfold, often leading from seemingly worthless fragments of everyday life to our innermost thoughts and longings.

- Freud was one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, but also one of the most controversial. His focus on the most intimate aspects of human existence continues to arouse hostility.
- Freud was the first psychologist to recognise the value of listening to his patients' life stories.
- Today, numerous studies from the field of neuroscience seem to corroborate aspects of Freud's work. However, many psychoanalysts are critical of the biological approach to mental suffering: they argue that it reduces human beings to biological objects.

PSYCHO ANALYSIS raises some BIG questions

Is the mind accessible through experiments and observations alone?

Is it ethical to medicate people for mental health problems?

Why do we have such strange beliefs?

Are there parts of our lives we would prefer to keep hidden?

Can everything we say and do be traced back to a conscious intention?

Are children truly 'innocent' or are they capable of the passionate extremes of love and hate?

Is it possible to draw a line between 'normal' and 'abnormal' mental processes?

Why do we have nightmares?

Why do we believe in things like ghosts? In what sense are we 'haunted'?

Are psychological problems caused by biological or cognitive faults that can be fixed through medication or cognitive therapy?

Do we repeat the same things in life without realizing it?

KEY TERMS:

The unconscious

Freud proposed the existence of a **dynamic unconscious**, containing ideas that have been **repressed**, and which the mind actively struggles to keep at bay.

Freud discovered the return of these ideas in disguised forms such as slips of the tongue, little mistakes, the words we find ourselves using, and dreams.

We think we are in control of our lives, but in Freud's view, it's the unconscious that controls us!

Sexuality

One of Freud's most surprising findings was the significance of sexuality as a driving force in his patients' lives. He noticed that sexuality was connected not only to pleasure, but also to anxiety.

But Freud's account of sexuality was very different to traditional definitions. He discovered components of sexuality throughout the body, and traced it back to much earlier in childhood than it was commonly thought to emerge. A baby's first experience of satisfaction, he observed, is at its mother's breast.

The Oedipus Complex

Freud uncovered complex emotional attitudes towards parents and siblings in his patients, leading him to view childhood as a time of intense feelings of love, hatred, envy and fear, culminating in a crisis that he called the 'Oedipus complex'.

The crisis may be resolved through repression, but is never extinguished: it lays down the template for how we relate to others throughout our lives.

The id, ego and superego

For Freud, the mind is in a constant state of conflict with itself. In his most famous account, he divided the mind into three parts: the id, the ego and the superego.

The id is the realm of appetites, wants and passions that do not take 'no' for an answer. The superego is connected to morality and social norms, built out of identifications with one's parents, and can be extremely cruel. The ego faces the task of finding a balance between the demands of the id and the superego. That's why the ego is the seat of the 'defence mechanisms' – there are so many dangers to avoid!

FIND OUT MORE

'What is Psychoanalysis?' is a 4-part educational film series for students and teachers. It can be found on YouTube.

www.freud.org.uk



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