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What's a theory

- “A set of interrelated concepts, definitions, propositions that presents a systematic view of events or situations by specifying relations among variables in order to explain and predict the events or situations.” (Glanz)
- An exercise in “worldmaking”
 - What are the relevant concepts
 - How might they be connected
- Something testable

Why use theories in research?

- To try to understand mechanisms
- Make complex situations comprehensible – at some level a simplification
- Guide observation
 - To help avoid post-hoc explanations based on chance results
 - To make sure we include observations felt to be relevant
 - To generate data that is comparable across settings

Why use theories in practice?

- To the extent that a theory is supported by data (ie, felt to approximate an underlying mechanism)
 - Provides guidance for points of intervention
 - Suggests appropriate ways to measure process and outcome
 - Gives a framework for analyzing what went wrong

Problems with theories

- Easy to mistake for “truth”
- Multiple theories can validly explain the same thing
- Need to be careful that test of theory properly measures the concept
 - Concepts are not always well defined
 - Concepts are only imperfectly mapped on to measures
- Theories vary in their level of specificity

Development

- Individuals, families, and other groups evolve over time.
- Changes in competencies, needs, perceptions, motivation.
- Changes in ability to interact with the environment, and which levels of the environment interact with

Transactional

- Individuals don't just respond to their environment, they interact with it.
 - “reciprocal determinism”
- The environment is not a fixed thing – its “reality” is in part a function of perception and of behavior.
- People can and do alter their reality.

Resilience

- Successful growth and adaptation (sometimes called resilience) is determined (at least in part) by the ability to “organize” experience – to make sense of it, and to achieve an inner state of regulation that allows optimal interaction with the external world.
- The essence of “transactional?”

Narrative as an organizing mechanism

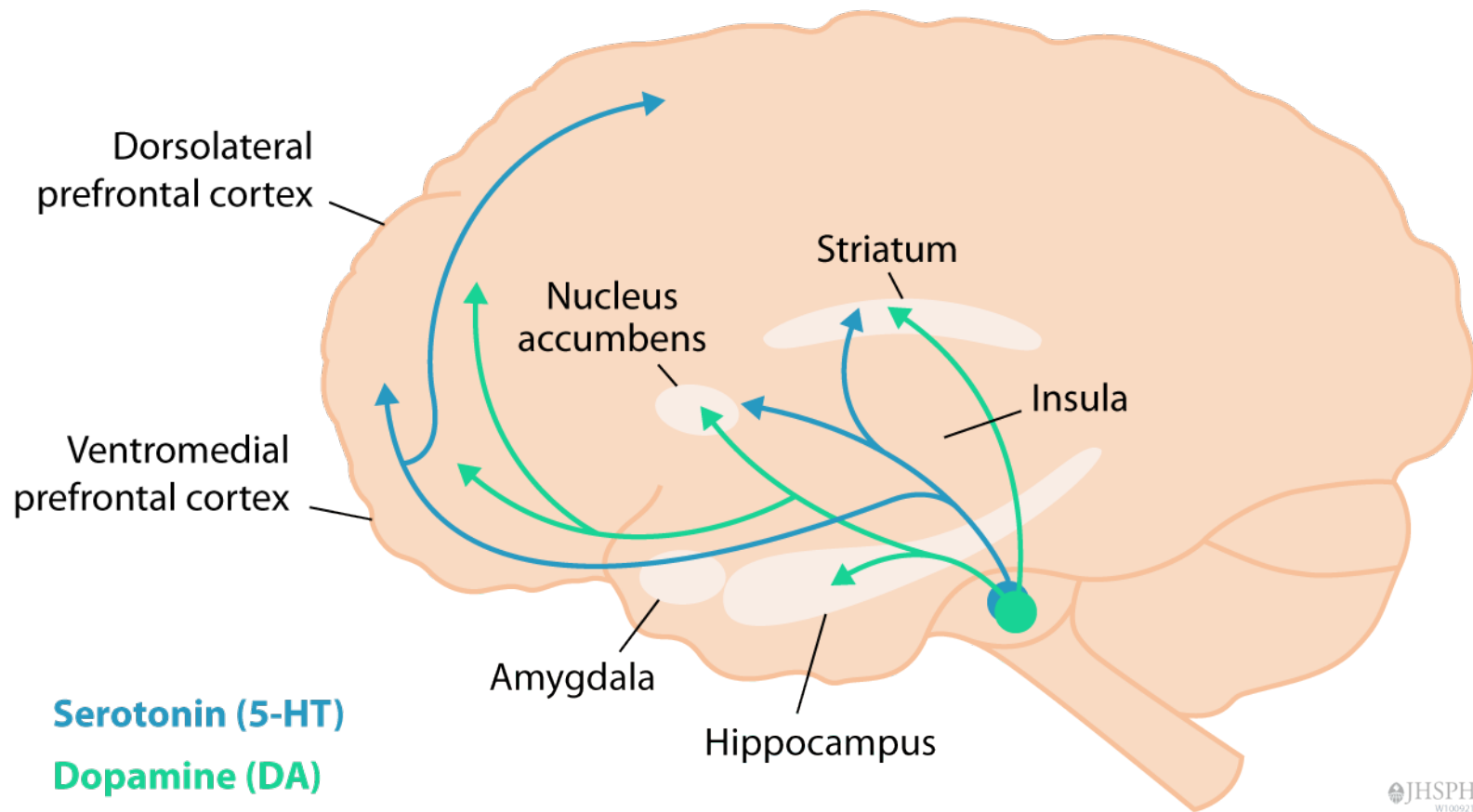
- Narrative defined:
- A story or account that an individual speaks or writes about an event, a situation, an illness, or about past or present relationships.
- Narratives put events in temporal or causal order, and link possibly unrelated events into a coherent whole.
- Contain an implicit or explicit message

Importance of narrative

- Thought to be mechanism by which people create “meaning” and predict the outcome of behavioral choices
- “Meaning” defined as personal implications of events, relationships, objects.
- Pause here to discuss our own sense of meaning and how it relates to adaptation and purpose

Meaning and the brain

- Brains seem to organize experience in the form of stories that play out the implications of experience.
 - Ventro-medial pre-frontal cortex (VMPC) links the stories (memories) to affective states
- The brain devotes much activity to developing and “satisfying” expectations (Bechara)
 - Area called the ventral striatum involved in anticipation and to arousal during uncertainty; relieved when the anticipated happens
- Stories that “make sense” trigger relaxation



What makes a good story?

- Our own ideas
- From the reading?
- How are stories different from data?

What are different uses of narrative/ stories?

- To convey information
- To persuade
 - Tool for “overcoming resistance”
- As a repository of information
- To “make sense” and thus to heal or understand
 - Convey ideas/emotions that are too complex for an essay or even a conversation

Characteristics of healing narratives (for the author) (DeSalvo)

- explicit and rich in detail
- link feelings to events
- balance use of positive and negative emotional words
- reveal insights from painful or adverse experiences
- tell a complete (enough), coherent story

Observational data

- Taylor: Women with breast cancer had better health status if:
 - Viewed cancer as reason to re-evaluate life and values
 - Developed sense of those more and less fortunate

Experimental data

- Pennebaker: write your “deepest thoughts and feelings” about a significant stressful or traumatic life experience for 15 minutes a day over the course of 3 days.
- Decreased anxiety, distress, improved immunologic functioning, better overall functioning.

What about reading or hearing narratives?

- Similar to reading “thick description” in anthropology: humanizes what is different
- Active attempt to discern structure and logic of story rather than force it into one’s own
- Active association of the story with one’s own experiences
- Willingness to tolerate emotions

Why read it aloud?

- Audio/visual presentations can be powerful policy and teaching tools
 - Reading it aloud really allows the voice to come through
 - It's a short trip from here to radio drama and other behavior change tools
- Practice listening is as important as practice writing and reading
- Speaking in front of others is a skill that is worth practicing
- Your thoughts and experiences are a gift to the rest of us.