

Poster presentation

## Inattentive blindness in psychotherapy

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from International Society on Brain and Behaviour: 2nd International Congress on Brain and Behaviour  
Thessaloniki, Greece. 17–20 November 2005

Published: 28 February 2006

*Annals of General Psychiatry* 2006, **5**(Suppl 1):S256 doi:10.1186/1744-859X-5-S1-S256

### Background

According to Goldstein [1], inattentive blindness refers to "a situation in which a stimulus that is not attended is not perceived, even though a person is looking directly at it". Perceptual experiments show that approximately 25% of people examining the perception of a small number of critical stimuli under conditions of inattention, failed to detect their presence [2,3].

### Materials and methods

A literature review revealed that there are several articles on lab experiments on inattentive blindness but no connection of this phenomenon to psychotherapy has been made till now.

### Results

That shows that conscious perception is not possible without attention. The paradox is that in order to see something with any detail in the environment, observers must first direct their attention toward an object. Speaking on a cell phone or talking to someone at a party without paying attention to nearby conversations by other people can absorb some attentional capacity and lead to inattentive blindness [4].

### Discussion

In cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy, an important concern of the therapist is to direct the patient's attention to specific issues that s/he is misperceiving. However, patients often report that they did not pay attention to specific signs from others or did not observe a psychologically threatening behaviour in their social environment. This can be explained in terms of inattentive blindness: in the case of depression, the person is absorbed in making, for example, self-defeating statements and fails to notice the action of others that may be psychologically detrimental to him/her.

In the case of anxiety, the person may be busy double-checking whether the door is locked, thus failing to pay attention to other, more relevant but less well-perceived aspects of his/her life. Although inattentive blindness does not explain the presence of mental illness, it may explain the reason why specific symptoms appear and become an obstacle in the patient's life.

### References

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4. Most SB, Simons DJ, Scholl BJ, Jimenez R, Clifford E, Chabris CF: **How not to be seen: the contribution of similarity and selective ignoring to sustained inattentive blindness**. *Psychological Science* 2001, **12**:9-17.