

## Case Study: Using IPNB and Attachment to Treat Anxiety

Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) and attachment theory are two powerful frameworks in psychology that can be very effective in treating anxiety. Here's an in-depth case study to illustrate how a mental health practitioner might use these approaches to help a client with anxiety:

### Client Background

- Name: Nathan (pseudonym)
- Age: 30
- Presenting Issue: Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)
- History: Nathan reports long-standing feelings of worry and anxiety, which have intensified over the past year. He has difficulty sleeping and concentrating, and he often feels restless. Nathan has a history of unstable relationships and describes a childhood with emotionally intrusive and inconsistent parents.

### Treatment Approach Using IPNB and Attachment Theory

#### Assessment Phase

1. Initial Evaluation: The therapist begins with a comprehensive assessment of Nathan's psychological history, focusing on attachment patterns, developmental history, personality inventory (PDP survey), and current functioning.
2. Attachment State of Mind Assessment: The therapist uses tools like the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) to identify Nathan's attachment state of mind, which appears to be anxious-preoccupied.
3. IPNB Understanding: The therapist explains how anxiety can be linked to personality patterns and attachment experiences, helping Nathan understand his anxiety in the context of IPNB's framework of domains of integration.

#### Treatment Phase

1. Building a Therapeutic Relationship:

- a. Safety and Trust: Establishing a secure base in the therapeutic relationship is crucial. The therapist shows consistent empathy, validation, and responsiveness with repair of any ruptures that may emerge.
  - b. Reflective Dialogues: The therapist engages in conversations that encourage Nathan to reflect on his thoughts and emotions, promoting insight.
2. Attachment Work:
  - a. Exploring Past Relationships: The therapist helps Nathan explore his past relationships to understand how his attachment strategy has interacted with this personality pattern to influence his states of anxiety.
  - b. Corrective Emotional Experiences: Through the therapeutic relationship, Nathan experiences a model of secure attachment, which helps in reorganizing their attachment strategies toward security.
3. Mindfulness and Regulation Strategies:
  - a. Mindfulness Practices: Mindfulness exercises are introduced to help Nathan become more aware of his moment-to-moment experiences, reducing rumination and worry.
  - b. Regulation Techniques: The therapist teaches Nathan about the neurobiology of anxiety and stress, introducing him to strategies to regulate the nervous system, like deep breathing and grounding techniques.
4. Integrating IPNB:
  - a. Understanding the Brain: The therapist educates Nathan on how the brain works in anxiety, particularly focusing on the regulatory role of the neuroplastic prefrontal cortex.
  - b. Relational focus: Insights into the social brain are shared, and focusing on the important role of interpersonal connection and communication to enhance the activation of the social engagement system and an open, receptive state of mind are shared.
  - c. Brain-Based Exercises: Exercises designed to strengthen the differentiation and then connections among different parts of the brain are emphasized, such as mindful awareness exercises including the Wheel of Awareness, insights into sub-cortical motivational networks of the PDP system, and cognitive reframing of the energy of anxiety into the meaning of stress and a challenge mindset.
5. Working on Narrative Coherence:
  - a. Life Story Work: Nathan is encouraged to construct a coherent narrative of his life, integrating past experiences with his current sense of self and exploring issues of implicit memory recollection in the intrusive and inconsistent emotional communication of his childhood.

- b. Reframing Narratives: The therapist helps Nathan reframe his internal narratives in a way that reduces anxiety and promotes a sense of security and inner-compassion, allowing coherence to emerge in the inner and outer focus of this narrative integration.

### **Review and Follow-Up**

1. Progress Review: Regular reviews are conducted to assess Nathan's progress and adjust the treatment plan and approach as necessary.
2. Relapse Prevention: Strategies for managing anxiety in the long term are discussed, including how to recognize and respond to triggers, and using examples of recurrent episodes of anxiety as windows of opportunity for deeper learning and practice rather than as failures.
3. Continued Support: The possibility of continued support or referral to group therapy for ongoing attachment work is discussed.

### **Outcome**

After several months of therapy, Nathan reports a significant reduction in anxiety symptoms. He has a better understanding of how his attachment strategies from the past affect his current relationships and now has developed healthier, more effective coping strategies. Nathan feels more secure in his sense of self and is able to manage anxiety more effectively, moving from the chaos to a state of clarity even after initial forays into anxious states of mind.

This case study demonstrates how the approach of IPNB, which includes the PDP framework and attachment theory, can be used to treat anxiety in a holistic and effective manner. It highlights the importance of understanding the interplay between brain functioning and temperament along with attachment history in shaping current psychological experiences.

## How This Approach Compares

The approach using Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB), which includes a focus on temperament and attachment experiences in the cultivation of personality patterns, can be used to assess and to treat anxiety offers several unique advantages compared to single-approach therapeutic modalities. Here's a detailed elaboration on why and how this framework and an IPNB-informed therapeutic experience might be more effective for certain clients compared to others:

### 1. Integration of Neuroscience and Psychology:

- **Holistic Understanding:** IPNB integrates findings from neuroscience, psychology, and developmental theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the mind, relationships and the brain interact. This holistic view can be more effective for clients who benefit from understanding the biological underpinnings of their mental health issues and the central role of relationships in our development and our healing.
- **Educational Component:** Educating clients about the neurological basis of their emotions and behavior can empower them and demystify their experiences, making the therapy process more transparent and less stigmatizing.

### 2. Focus on Attachment:

- **Root Causes:** Attachment theory delves into the root causes of emotional regulation strategies by examining early attachment experiences. This can be particularly effective for clients whose anxiety is rooted in early life experiences and relational traumas; but for anyone, seeing the role of relationships in ongoing life can provide an important and sometimes underemphasized approach to cultivating well-being.
- **Corrective Emotional Experiences:** The therapeutic relationship itself serves as a corrective emotional experience. This can be more effective than approaches that focus solely on symptoms or behavior modification, as it addresses underlying attachment needs and enables the current therapeutic connection to foster the growth of neural integration that may have been underdeveloped in the individual's life.

### 3. Emphasis on Mindfulness and Self-Regulation:

- **Mind-Body Connection:** IPNB focuses on integration as the key to well-being and the cultivation of resilience. IPNB often incorporates mindfulness, which fosters a stronger mind-body connection and leads to the growth of neural integration in the brain. This can be more effective for clients who struggle with disembodiment or disconnection, common in anxiety disorders.
- **Neurobiological Regulation:** Techniques that specifically target neurobiological regulation (like breath-awareness practices) can be more directly effective in managing physiological symptoms of anxiety than some traditional talk therapies.

4. Narrative and Identity Work: Making sense of one's life is an integrative practice, one that facilitates a coherence in the inner and relational life of the client.

- Coherent Narrative: IPNB often emphasizes creating a coherent narrative of the client's life history. This can be particularly healing for clients with fragmented sense of self or those who have experienced complex trauma.
- Integration of Past and Present: This approach facilitates a deeper integration of past experiences with present functioning, which might be more effective for clients who need to process past traumas or attachment disruptions.

### **Comparison with Other Frameworks**

While there is no framework that provides a definition of the mind, one that sees a healthy mind as one that promotes integration within the body and within relational connections, IPNB can be compared to how specific therapeutic modalities may approach psychotherapy:

- Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT): While CBT is highly effective for anxiety, focusing primarily on changing thought patterns and behaviors, it may not delve as deeply into attachment issues or the neurobiological aspects of anxiety as an IPNB-informed therapist might also provide. For some clients, CBT's more surface-level approach might be less effective in addressing deep-rooted attachment traumas, while for others it may be more effective.
- Psychodynamic Therapy: While psychodynamic therapy also explores early relationships and attachment, it might not incorporate the latest neurobiological research or specific mindfulness and self-regulation strategies as IPNB-therapists are prepared to do.
- Humanistic Therapies: Humanistic therapies emphasize self-actualization and the therapeutic relationship but may lack the structured integration of neurobiological understanding and attachment theory that is central to IPNB.

### **Suitability and Limitations**

- Individual Differences: The effectiveness of IPNB-informed approaches depends on individual client needs. It may be particularly beneficial for those with a history of relational trauma or those interested in understanding the neurobiological aspects of their anxiety. But given that every person has both a mind a pattern of feeling, thinking, and behaving we call personality, then IPNB can be helpful too all, even those with secure attachment histories.
- Complexity and Depth: This approach may require a longer duration of therapy and a willingness to deeply explore past experiences, which might not be suitable or appealing for all clients. An IPNB-informed therapist is able to assess the chaos and rigidity that may be the expressions of impaired integration and carefully construct therapeutic interventions at the right level of complexity and depth for a given client, no matter the therapist intricate insights into the origins and integrative challenges being presented in therapy.

In conclusion, the integration of IPNB offers a comprehensive, in-depth approach that addresses the neurobiological, psychological, and relational aspects of anxiety. It's particularly effective for clients whose anxiety is intertwined with attachment issues or particular personality patterns related to anxiety and fear, as well as for those who benefit from a holistic understanding of their mental health. An IPNB-informed therapist is in the flexible position to choose which specific modalities of therapy can be selected in a tailored approach to a given individual's specific needs, preferences, and therapeutic goals.