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Why do so many people seek therapy?

Your own behavior can be a mystery. Therapy can help.

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Sometimes life is difficult, and we know exactly why. The death of a relative can lead to [grief](#) that can be hard to overcome. Surviving an accident or being the victim of a crime can lead to [fear](#), [anxiety](#), or numbness. Bouts of depression can be debilitating.

For many people, though, the cause of their unease is not so clear.

A paper by Elizabeth Parks-Stamm, Gabriele Oettingen, and Peter Gollwitzer in a 2010 issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* helps to explain why so many people benefit from seeing a therapist.

These researchers are interested in the feelings that emerge from actions that people take. They start by taking advantage of studies demonstrating that people can be primed to take actions without their awareness. In one study, people first responded to a number of briefly presented words that were supposed to be part of a study of how people make speeded responses. One group saw words related to [cooperation](#) (like help, assist, and share). Another group saw words relating to [competition](#) (like win, beat, and conquer). Many studies have shown that when people see words relating to cooperation, they act more cooperatively than when they see words relating to competition.

Next, people played a game with a partner over a computer network. (Unbeknownst to the participant, the partner was actually a computer program.) In this game, the players were supposed to search for numbers in a complex matrix. The idea was for the players to cooperate when playing this game, and the game was even titled "The cooperative Where's Waldo game." The participants who saw words relating to cooperation played the game slowly to allow their partner (who was programmed to find answers slowly) to do well. The participants who saw words relating to competition played the game quickly to ensure that they found more items than their partner.

After playing the game, participants were asked how they felt. Those players who violated the spirit of the game by playing fast felt worse overall than those who played the game slowly. The players did not know why they felt worse, they just did.

So far, then, this result shows that you may engage in actions without knowing why, and those actions can make you feel bad. That alone might be enough to lead you toward [therapy](#).

But it gets worse.

Prior to playing the game I just described, the participants performed what they were told was an

unrelated experiment. In this other task, people were given nouns (like dog) and were asked to generate related verbs (like bark). Some people were told they should do this task as quickly as possible. Others were told they should do it as accurately as possible. Giving people instructions emphasizing accuracy tends to make them do a task more slowly than giving people instructions that emphasize speed.

This first task affected the way people felt after the second task.

People who got instructions emphasizing speed in the first task did not feel bad when they played the second game competitively. The participants who played the second game competitively played it fast. But, when they had been told to do the first task fast, they assumed that they must just have been in some kind of fast mode and they were doing everything fast. So, they explained away their inappropriate competitiveness as being related to the first task.

Now, let's put all of this together.

There are times when we do things without knowing why, and that makes us feel bad. We feel bad, because we have done something wrong (like competing when we should cooperate) without knowing why.

But, there are also times when we do something wrong and don't feel bad about it because we are able to justify it based on something else we were doing that actually had nothing to do with our improper behavior.

That means that we often have no idea at all why we might be feeling sad or anxious. We also may be mystified when someone else is angry at us for doing something when we feel like our actions are totally justified. Our own behavior can sometimes be a complete mystery to ourselves.

And that is where therapy comes in. A therapist can help you to understand first that your own beliefs about why you do what you do may be wrong. In therapy, you can then start to disentangle all of the factors that may be affecting what you do to help you understand why you may be feeling bad about some of your actions and why you may not feel bad about other actions when perhaps you should.