About Difficult Patients

Stressed Out

An Insider’s Guide to Success

- Why patients act the way they do
- Strategies to deal with anger, frustration, violence, and suicide
- How to handle disorders—from anxiety to schizophrenia
- Tips to keep yourself calm in stressful situations

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Chapter 1

Why do people act the way they do?

Before we get into the difficult behaviors of our patients, let’s do a quick review of the brain. Understanding the way our brain processes information helps us understand why some people act the way they do.

A brief review of brain function

Although the brain makes up only 2% of our body weight, it consumes 20% of the oxygen we breathe and 20% of the energy we take in. It controls everything we experience, including our movement and our ability to sense our environment, and regulates our body processes.

The basic functional unit of the brain, the neuron, connects with other neurons, sensory receptors, and muscle cells. A typical neuron has four structurally and functionally defined regions: the cell body, dendrites, axons, and axon terminals.
Chapter 1  Why do people act the way they do?

Neuronal **dendrites** extend from the cell body, branching out and serving as the main apparatus for **receiving** input from other nerve cells.

The neuronal **axon** carries messages away from the cell body, relaying these messages to other cells. Near its end, the axon divides into many fine branches that have specialized swellings called **axon terminals** or **presynaptic terminals**, which end near the dendrites of another neuron. The dendrites of one neuron receive the messages sent from the axon terminals of another neuron at the **synapse**.

The synapse is not a physical connection between the two neurons, but rather an electrical/chemical interchange in the intercellular space between the presynaptic neuron (the cell that sends out information) and the postsynaptic neuron (the cell that receives the information).
Neurons relay their information using both electrical signals and chemical messages in a process called neurotransmission.

Here’s how the interchange at the synaptic space works:

1. An electrical impulse is carried away from the neuron along the axon of the presynaptic neuron.

2. When it reaches the presynaptic axon terminal, the electrical signal triggers the release of chemicals (neurotransmitters) that cross the synapse to affect the postsynaptic cell.

3. The neurotransmitters drift across the synaptic cleft and bind to special proteins (receptors) on the postsynaptic neuron.

4. An electrical impulse is generated that moves away from the dendrite toward the cell body.

5. Specific proteins (transporters or reuptake pumps) carry the neurotransmitters back into the presynaptic neuron, to await the next electrical impulse to reach the axon terminal.
6. Enzymes present in the synaptic space degrade neurotransmitter molecules that are not taken back up into the presynaptic neuron.

Each neuron specializes in the synthesis and secretion of a single type of neurotransmitter. Some of the predominant neurotransmitters in the brain include glutamate, gamma-aminobutyric acid, serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine. Each of these neurotransmitters has a specific distribution and function in the brain.

Many of the behaviors attributed to mental illnesses are most likely the result of problems with neurotransmission:

- **Depression and serotonin:** For example, serotonin levels are lower in individuals who have depression. Thus, the medications commonly used to treat depression—specifically, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)—relieve the symptoms by reducing the amount of serotonin that is taken back into the presynaptic neuron, leading to an increase in the amount of serotonin available in the synaptic space for binding to the receptor on the postsynaptic neuron.

- **Schizophrenia and dopamine, glutamate, and norepinephrine:** On the other hand, disruptions in the neurotransmitters dopamine, glutamate, and norepinephrine are common in individuals with schizophrenia.

So, simply put, one reason people behave the way they do is often a direct result of brain functioning.

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