



Discussion forum

Definition: Apathy

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Apathy is a clinical syndrome characterised by a reduction in self-initiated, goal-directed activity, which is not driven by primary motor or sensory impairments, or other comorbidities such as drug intoxication or intercurrent illness. Apathy is not a unitary syndrome, and can be manifest across different dimensions. 'Behavioural apathy' refers to a reduction in an individual's willingness to initiate or sustain voluntary, goal-directed physical activity, and/or activities of daily living. 'Cognitive apathy' refers to a reduction in spontaneous ideas or intellectual curiosity; a lower interest in problem solving; and/or a lower willingness to engage in cognitively challenging activities. 'Emotional apathy' (sometimes referred to as emotional blunting) refers to a reduction in empathy, spontaneous emotion, emotional responsiveness, or emotional intensity. 'Social apathy' refers to a reduction in initiative in proposing or engaging in social activities or interactions. This reduction in activity must represent a significant decline relative to the patient's previous level of functioning.

Apathy has traditionally been associated with diminished levels of motivation to act, as well as with the 'auto-activation deficits' (i.e., reduction in spontaneously generated mental processes) that may follow basal ganglia lesions. More recently, the lower motivation in apathy has been

mechanistically attributed to impairments in valuing the costs and benefits of a course of action. Apathy often coexists with disorders of cognition (e.g., dementia) or mood (e.g., depression) – importantly, however, apathy is independent of, and dissociable from, them. Although apathy is common in many different neurological and psychiatric conditions, it remains unclear whether its manifestations across separate disease entities reflect dysfunction in a common underlying circuit or brain network, regardless of the underlying neuropathology.

Clinically, apathy is assessed through clinical interview, and/or with questionnaire-based measures completed by the individual or their carer. There is no gold standard, and each questionnaire probes one or more dimensions of apathy. Recent attempts to more accurately assess apathy have focused on objective measures to quantify reductions in goal-directed activity (such as the use of actigraphy for behavioural apathy). Experimentally, behavioural and cognitive apathy have been operationalised in terms of the sensitivity of individuals to rewarding outcomes or effortful costs. Far less is understood about the mechanisms underlying emotional and social apathy.

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