

## **Cognitive-Behavioral Model (“It’s a Thought-thing.”)**

**Deindividuation** is feeling anonymous in one’s environment, resulting in behaviors contrary to one’s typical pattern of behavior. This term has been in social psychology literature since the early 1970s. Johnson and Downing (1979) concluded that anonymity causes individuals to pay more attention to their external cues and environment, and less to their own self-awareness and internal guides. The field of Internet psychology applies this concept to the electronic world. McKenna and Green (2002, p.61) reported that people “*tend to behave more bluntly when communicating by e-mail or participating in other electronic venues such as newsgroups, then they would in a face-to-face situation.*” **Deindividuation** combined with the **online disinhibition** effect creates powerful force in the online world where individuals write, speak, and behave in ways that are often egodystonic to their real-world interactions.

### **Online Disinhibition**

Suler (2004) coined the term **online disinhibition effect** to describe the phenomenon that people communicate and behave differently online than in the real world. He identified six characteristics that are often present when online disinhibition occurs.

#### **DISSOCIATIVE ANONYMITY (“You don’t know me.”)**

As people move around the Internet, others they encounter can’t easily determine who they are. Usernames and e-mail addresses may be visible, but this information may not reveal much about a person, especially if the username is contrived and the e-mail address derives from a large Internet service provider. Technologically savvy, motivated users may be able to detect a computer’s IP address, but for the most part others only know what a person tells them. If so desired, people can hide some or all of their identity. They also can alter their identities. As the word “anonymous” indicates, people can have no name or at least not their real name.

This anonymity is one of the principle factors that creates the disinhibition effect. When people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out. Whatever they say or do can’t be directly linked to the rest of their lives. In a process of dissociation, they don’t have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity. The online self becomes a compartmentalized self. In the case of expressed hostilities or other deviant actions, the person can avert responsibility for those behaviors, almost as if superego restrictions and moral cognitive processes have been temporarily suspended from the online psyche. In fact, people might even convince themselves that those online behaviors “aren’t me at all.”

#### **INVISIBILITY (“You can’t see me.”)**

In many online environments, especially those that are text-driven, people cannot see each other. When people visit web sites, message boards, and even some chat rooms, other people may not even know they are present at all—with the possible exception of web masters and other users who have access to software tools that can detect traffic through the environment, assuming they have the inclination to keep an eye on an individual person, who is one of maybe hundreds or thousands of users.

This invisibility gives people the courage to go places and do things that they otherwise wouldn’t. Although this power to be concealed overlaps with anonymity—because anonymity is the concealment of identity—there are some important differences. In the text communication of e-mail, chat, instant messaging, and blogs, people may know a great deal about each other’s identities and lives. However, they still cannot see or hear each other.

Even with everyone’s identity known, the opportunity to be physically invisible amplifies the disinhibition effect. People don’t have to worry about how they look or sound when they type a message. They don’t have to worry about how others look or sound in response to what they say. Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can

inhibit what people are willing to express. According to traditional psychoanalytic theory, the analyst sits behind the patient in order to remain a physically ambiguous figure, revealing no body language or facial expression, so that the patient has free range to discuss whatever he or she wants without feeling inhibited by how the analyst is physically reacting. In everyday relationships, people sometimes avert their eyes when discussing something personal and emotional. Avoiding eye contact and face-to-face visibility disinhibits people. Text communication offers a built-in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted.

### **ASYNCHRONICITY** (*"See you later."*)

In e-mail and message boards, communication is asynchronous. People don't interact with each other in real time. Others may take minutes, hours, days, or even months to reply. Not having to cope with someone's immediate reaction disinhibits people. In real life, the analogy might be speaking to someone, magically suspending time before that person can reply, and then returning to the conversation when one is willing and able to hear the response.

In a continuous feedback loop that reinforces some behaviors and extinguishes others, moment-by-moment responses from others powerfully shapes the ongoing flow of self-disclosure and behavioral expression, usually in the direction of conforming to social norms. In e-mail and message boards, where there are delays in that feedback, people's train of thought may progress more steadily and quickly towards deeper expressions of benign and toxic disinhibition that avert social norms. Some people may even experience asynchronous communication as "running away" after posting a message that is personal, emotional, or hostile. It feels safe putting it "out there" where it can be left behind. In some cases, as Kali Munro, an online psychotherapist, aptly describes it, the person may be participating in an "emotional hit and run" (K. Munro, unpublished observations, 2003).

### **SOLIPSISTIC INTROJECTION** (*"It's all in my head."*)

Absent face-to-face cues combined with text communication can alter self-boundaries. People may feel that their mind has merged with the mind of the online companion. Reading another person's message might be experienced as a voice within one's head, as if that person's psychological presence and influence have been assimilated or introjected into one's psyche.

Of course, one may not know what the other person's voice actually sounds like, so in one's mind a voice is assigned to that person. In fact, consciously or unconsciously, a person may even assign a visual image to what he or she thinks the person looks and behaves like. The online companion then becomes a character within one's intrapsychic world, a character shaped partly by how the person actually presents him or herself via text communication, but also by one's internal representational system based on personal expectations, wishes, and needs. Transference reactions encourage the shaping of this perceived introjected character when similarities exist between the online companion and significant others in one's life, and when one fills in ambiguities in the personality of the online companion with images of past relationships, or from novels and film. As the introjected character becomes more elaborate and subjectively "real," a person may start to experience the typed-text conversation as taking place inside one's mind, within the imagination, within one's intrapsychic world—not unlike authors typing out a play or novel.

Even when online relationships are not involved, many people carry on these kinds of conversations in their imagination throughout the day. People fantasize about flirting, arguing with a boss, or honestly confronting a friend about what they feel. In their imagination, where it's safe, people feel free to say and do things they would not in reality. At that moment, reality is one's imagination. Online text communication can evolve into an introjected psychological tapestry in which a person's mind weaves these fantasy role plays, usually unconsciously and with considerable disinhibition. Cyberspace may become a stage, and we are merely players.

When reading another's message, one might also "hear" the online companion's voice using one's own voice. People may subvocalize as they read, thereby projecting the sound of their voice into the other person's text. This conversation may be experienced unconsciously as talking to/with oneself, which encourages disinhibition because talking with oneself feels safer than talking with others. For some people,

talking with oneself may feel like confronting oneself, which may unleash many powerful psychological issues.

### **DISSOCIATIVE IMAGINATION** (“*It’s just a game.*”)

If we combine the opportunity to easily escape or dissociate from what happens online with the psychological process of creating imaginary characters, we get a somewhat different force that magnifies disinhibition. Consciously or unconsciously, people may feel that the imaginary characters they “created” exist in a different space, that one’s online persona along with the online others live in an make-believe dimension, separate and apart from the demands and responsibilities of the real world. They split or dissociate online fiction from offline fact. Emily Finch, an author and criminal lawyer who studies identity theft in cyberspace, has suggested that some people see their online life as a kind of game with rules and norms that don’t apply to everyday living (E. Finch, unpublished observations, 2002). Once they turn off the computer and return to their daily routine, they believe they can leave behind that game and their gameidentity. They relinquish their responsible for what happens in a make-believe play world that has

The effect of this dissociative imagination surfaces clearly in fantasy game environments in which a user consciously creates an imaginary character, but it also can influence many dimensions of online living. For people with a predisposed difficulty in distinguishing personal fantasy from social reality, the distinction between online fantasy environments and online social environments may be blurred. In our modern media-driven lifestyles, the power of computer and video game imagination can infiltrate reality testing.

Although anonymity amplifies the effect of dissociative imagination, dissociative imagination and dissociative anonymity usually differ in the complexity of the dissociated sector of the self. Under the influence of anonymity, the person may attempt an invisible non-identity, resulting in a reducing, simplifying, or compartmentalizing of self-expression. In dissociative imagination, the expressed but split-off self may evolve greatly in complexity.

### **MINIMIZATION OF STATUS AND AUTHORITY** (“*We’re equals.*”)

While online a person’s status in the face-to-face world may not be known to others and may not have as much impact. Authority figures express their status and power in their dress, body language, and in the trappings of their environmental settings. The absence of those cues in the text environments of cyberspace reduces the impact of their authority.

Even if people do know something about an authority figure’s offline status and power, that elevated position may have less of an effect on the person’s online presence and influence. In many environments on the Internet, everyone has an equal opportunity to voice him or herself. Everyone— regardless of status, wealth, race, or gender— starts off on a level playing field. Although one’s identity in the outside world ultimately may shape power in cyberspace, what mostly determines the influence on others is one’s skill in communicating (including writing skills), persistence, the quality of one’s ideas, and technical know-how.

People are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure. A fear of disapproval and punishment from on high dampens the spirit. But online, in what feels more like a peer relationship—with the appearances of authority minimized—people are much more willing to speak out and misbehave.

The traditional Internet philosophy holds that everyone is an equal, that the purpose of the net is to share ideas and resources among peers. The net itself is designed with no centralized control, and as it grows, with seemingly no end to its potential for creating new environments, many of its inhabitants see themselves as innovative, independent-minded explorers and pioneers. This atmosphere and this philosophy contribute to the minimizing of authority.