brio

mental health design toolkit
section 1: where does it hurt?

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

psychologist's tools to understanding a patient's environment

Ecological Systems Analysis

In order to detail specific pain points for the mental health problem you've identified, we need to understand people in context. Pain points are the product of the systems that comprise human life. One useful psychological model for understanding the role of systems is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

In the Ecological Systems Theory, each individual is understood in the context of the broader systems around them. Pain points can be felt in any of these areas and understanding the full picture can help to clarify the most important points for successful alleviation of pain.

related tools: mental health problem definition, empathy exercise, problem chain analysis

systems & instructions

Microsystem
The microsystem is comprised of the people and institutions that individuals have the closest contact with. This might include family, friends, school, work, health services, church, etc. The microsystem has a large influence in each individual's life and is frequently the primary area where we first notice a problem. At this level, the problem pain points are usually pretty clear because they have the most direct effect on individuals

Filling in the microsystem

When you think of the problem you have identified, how would the individual in your empathy exercise describe their challenges? If you ask one of these individuals facing the problem you want to address "Where does it hurt?", what would they say? Try breaking it down into each category of microsystem components and using the language of someone struggling with the problem. Hint: If you get stuck thinking about how it hurts, try asking "how does it make things more difficult?"

Where does the problem hurt in your...?
1. Family
2. Friendships
3. School/work
4. Healthcare Provider
5. Spiritual Community

Exosystem

Even though the mesosystem is closer to the individual than the exosystem, it is impossible to accurately describe the mesosystem without first defining the exosystem. Once we look beyond the immediate influence of the people and institutions closest to an individual, it becomes clear that there are many large factors also at play.

The exosystem is comprised of the large systems that make up society. This might include neighborhoods, local industry, government social services, local politics, and traditional media (TV, news, radio, etc). These are not particular people and they do not have an individual connection to us. Yet, they are a significant part of each individual's life. The problem is not located purely within individuals and examining the exosystem can help us to discover who the structural stakeholders fit into the big picture.

Filling in the exosystem

Step 1: Recall the stakeholders you identified as being affected by the problem. Some of these stakeholders may have closer relationships with our individual and fit better in the micro system. If so, see if you can identify a few more societal or structural forces that either affect the problem or are affected by the problem.

Step 2: Describe how these exosystem factors might explain the problem. Do neighborhoods focus on crime? Do politicians emphasize social services? Does the media highlight the economy? How does the exosystem describe where it hurts?

Before your mind jumps to thinking about the individual again, see if you can focus on just the big exosystem structures and what messages you can interpret about where it hurts.

related tools: stakeholder mapping, empathy exercise, problem chain analysis

Mesosystem

Returning to the mesosystem, we can begin to analyze how our individual's microsystem interacts with the larger exosystem. These interactions are incredibly important because they are the way that huge societal forces shape every day life.

The mesosystem is comprised of all the interactions between both the big and small influences in our individual's life. For example, the way family members get involved in friendships is part of the mesosystem. The mesosystem also includes how neighborhoods are portrayed by local politicians in the media. It gets even more complicated when the mico- and exo- systems interact in the case example of how family and friends might disagree about the effects of neighborhood violence on the mental health that politicians are talking about in the news.

Despite how messy and confusing the mesosystem can become, it is critical to reflect on key interactions that are important for *the problem*.
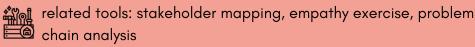
Filling in the mesosystem

Step 1: Reflect on all the different pain points identified in the microsystem. Write down the top 2-3 that feel most important.

Step 2: Reflect on all the different pain points identified in the exosystem. Write down the top 2-3 that feel most important.

Step 3: Comparing the two lists of pain points, what are the connections? How is the smaller community around our individual affected by the larger societal forces? Are there helpful influences? Are their interactions that amplify the pain? What about the other way around...how is our individual and their immediate community affecting the larger system? What pain points get better or worse as they interact with the bigger system?

Step 4: Using the reflections and insights generated in step 3, challenge yourself to come up with the most important 2-3 interactions that best define the mesosystem around the problem our individual faces.

related tools: stakeholder mapping, empathy exercise, problem chain analysis

Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the context for all of the individual's micro-, meso-, and exo- system. The macrosystem is comprised of factors such as social norms, cultural values, and the constitutions/laws. We often instinctively know that the macrosystem is important, but sometimes we lose sight of how these broad contextual influences affect individuals. However, the ways these abstract concepts influence every level of human life make them even more important to examine.

related tools: stakeholder mapping, empathy exercise, problem chain analysis

Filling in the macrosystem

We are rarely able to simply list the key beliefs, values, norms, and laws that shape our reality. So, we must start with the basics. Think of the individual you identified in the empathy exercise. What messages do they receive about what it means to be their gender? What about their age? What do people around them expect of them just by looking at them? What are the messages around race, ethnicity, or family ancestry?

What does it mean to be healthy and strong? What is assumed about people who struggle with the problem? What beliefs does our individual have about seeking support? What are the acceptable places to go for help? What does it say about you as a person, a family member, or a friend to experience the problem?

What are the messages you hear from your spiritual leaders? What does the law say about people with the problem? If the problem was visible, how would they be treated in public?

This list of questions could go on forever. It is impossible to identify every single macrosystem factor. However, by reflecting on these questions at least two or three critical points should hopefully start to emerge as important for understanding where it hurts for our individual.

ecological systems analysis

macrosystem

mesosystem

exosystem

microsystem

individual