



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Key Term	Definition
12-step recovery programmes	A type of self-help group that gives group members 12 principles to follow in order to be able to stop using drugs, alcohol, etc.
Accommodation	When we receive new information or experience a new situation, a type of learning happens that causes us to change an existing schema or developing a new schema.
Adaptive	When an individual's physical or psychological characteristics are able to change in order to fit different situations and environments. Being adaptive increases that individual's chances of survival and successful reproduction.
Addiction	A mental health problem in which an individual's repeated behaviour or substance use results in them becoming entirely focused on the behaviour or substance. Withdrawal symptoms will occur without regular engagement in the behaviour or use of the substance.
Agency	The awareness we have of carrying out and being in control of our own actions.
Allocation to conditions	Assigning participants into each of the conditions in an experiment.
Alternative hypothesis	A hypothesis that states that a significant relationship between two variables does exist. Opposing statement to the null hypothesis.
Ambiguity	Being able to be interpreted or understood in more than one way.
Anonymity	Being unknown to most people; not able to be identified.
Antidepressants	A form of medication used to prevent and treat depression and some other conditions (eg anxiety, OCD).
Antisocial behaviour	Acting in ways that are socially unacceptable.
Appetite	An automatic physical need, especially to eat or drink.
Assimilation	When we receive new information or experience a new situation, a type of learning that causes us to add new information to an existing schema.
Attributions	The ways in which we explain situations and behaviour of ourselves and others.
Auditory area (of the brain)	An area of the temporal lobe that is involved with hearing.
Authoritarian personality	A person who has a strong belief that authority figures should be obeyed. A person who is obedient to people who are in authority or have a higher status than them has this type of personality.
Authority	When a person has the right to give orders, or when they are perceived by others to have the right to do so.



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Autonomic functions	Bodily functions that happen without our conscious control – such as breathing, digestion and heart rate.
Autonomic nervous system (ANS)	A system of nerve fibres running throughout the body which are responsible for autonomic functions. They connect the senses and the internal organs with the central nervous system.
Aversion therapy	A treatment to help people stop undesirable behaviours (eg substance abuse). The person experiences some form of discomfort when carrying out the undesirable behaviour. This results in the behaviour becoming associated with the discomfort and therefore being less likely to be engaged in, in the future.
Bar chart	A type of graph that is used to display data from different groups. Numerical values are represented by the height or length of lines or rectangles.
Behaviour	The way a person acts towards others or in response to a situation or stimulus.
Binocular depth cues	Ways of perceiving depth or distance that need two eyes.
Bipolar depression	A mood disorder that causes a person's mood, energy, and activity levels to move between being depressed or manic.
Body language	Conscious and unconscious postures, gestures and movements that convey attitudes and feelings. Also a commonly used term for non-verbal communication.
Brain stem	The part of the base of the brain that is connected to the spinal cord and controls messages between the brain and the rest of the body. It also controls bodily functions such as breathing and heart rate.
British Psychological Society (BPS) guidelines	The ethical guidelines that cover the work of all practising and research psychologists. Produced by the British Psychological Society in its Code of Ethics and Conduct (2006) and Code of Human Research Ethics (2014). Details how participants in psychological research should be treated.
Bystander behaviour	The way that an individual acts when they see someone needing help.
Bystander intervention	When an individual goes to the aid of someone they see needing help.
Capacity	A measure of how much information can be stored.
Case study	An in-depth investigation of an individual, group, organisation or specific situation.
Categories of behaviour	Specific actions that can be observed and recorded as examples of the target behaviour.
Central nervous system (CNS)	Consists of the brain and spinal cord, co-ordinates the entire nervous system.
Cerebellum	A small, wrinkled structure at the base of the brain above the spinal cord. Coordinates motor movement, dexterity, and balance and has a role in cognition.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Closed posture	Adopting a position with arms folded across the body and/or crossing the legs. May indicate disagreement or irritation.
Coding	The way that information is represented to be stored.
Cognition	Mental processes such as thinking, planning and problem solving.
Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)	A treatment that helps people to manage their problems and emotions encouraging them to change the way they think and behave.
Cognitive development	The changes and advancements that take place over time in an individual's mental processes.
Cognitive neuroscience	The scientific study of how cognitive processes and biological structures are connected.
Collective behaviour	Actions that happen when people are part of a group. This behaviour may be different from the way the same people would behave individually or when alone.
Communication	Sending or receiving information between people (or animals).
Concrete operational	Being able to apply logic when using physical objects in order to solve problems.
Condition	To investigate the effect of an IV (independent variable) on the dependent variable, participants take part in different trials/situations called conditions. Participants in each trial or situation will experience a different part of the IV.
Conformity	When perceived group pressure leads to people changing their opinions or behaviours in order to fit in with socially accepted conventions and norms.
Conservation	Being aware that the quantity of something is still the same, even if it looks different.
Context	The surroundings for an event, thought or memory which enable these things to be more fully understood and may act as a cue to recall.
Convergence	Depth perception that uses the extent to which eye muscles have to work, in order to focus on images/objects. The closer an image/object is, the more the eye muscles have to work.
Coping	The ability to deal with responsibilities and problems calmly and effectively.
Correlation	A mathematical technique used to establish the strength of a relationship between variables.
Correlational relationship	A connection or association between variables.
Cortex	The outer layer of the brain where higher cognitive functions, such as speech, occur.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Counterbalancing	An arrangement used in repeated measures design to even out order effects. Half of the participants take part in the conditions in one order (A followed by B) while the other half take part in them in the opposite order (B followed by A).
Crowd	A large group of individuals who gather together temporarily for a common reason.
CT scan	Computerised Tomography image: a machine scans the body or the brain using a series of X-rays and then creates a detailed 3D image.
Cultural norms	The types of customs, beliefs and behaviours that members of a particular community of people are likely to hold or use.
Cultural variation	Different communities of people will have differences in customs, beliefs and behaviours.
Culture	A community of people who share the same customs, beliefs and behaviours.
Decimal	Numbers where a point is used to separate whole numbers from parts. Numbers can be placed to the left or right of the point, to show values greater than one or less than one.
Deindividuation	The state of losing our sense of individuality and self-awareness, resulting in our feeling less responsibility for our actions.
Dependence	Frequently using a substance or carrying out a behaviour can result in a compulsion to continue such behaviours/use. When the behaviour is not repeated or the substance is not present, withdrawal symptoms will occur.
Dependent variable (DV)	The thing that will be measured by a researcher to see if changing the IV has had any effect.
Depth cue	Ways of perceiving depth or distance – may be binocular or monocular.
Development	The manner in which, over time, someone grows and changes and becomes more advanced.
Dispositional factors	Personal characteristics which may affect a person's behaviour and choices.
Duration	How long information can be stored in the memory.
Ecological validity	The results of the investigation can be said to apply to real-life behaviour; they are an accurate account of behaviour in the real world.
Economy	A country or region's levels of production, trade, distribution and consumption of goods and services.
Effort after meaning	Making sense of something unfamiliar by changing it into more familiar terms.
Egocentric	Not being able to see things from another person's point of view.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Emoticon	A representation of a facial expression that is used as a non-verbal way of expressing emotions or moods. Generally seen in written communication that uses technology, such emails and texts.
Emotion	Moods or feelings that an individual experiences.
Encoding	Information taken into the memory is changed into a form that can be stored and later recalled.
Energy levels	A capacity for carrying out physical activity.
Episodic memory	Recollections of personal experiences or events, (may include feelings as well as recall of what took place).
Estimate	Figures are rounded to make the calculation simpler, which makes the answer roughly, but not exactly, right.
Ethical issues	Concerns about what is morally right and best for participants when researchers are carrying out research.
Evolve	To change slowly over a number of generations into a different form or state.
Excitation	A neurotransmitter binding with a receptor on the next neuron and increasing the likelihood that the next neuron will fire an electrical impulse.
Expectation	Beliefs or feelings about what it is that we will experience.
Experiment (the experimental method)	A research method in which the researcher tries to control all variables other than the IV and DV; this allows the researcher to identify a cause-and-effect relationship between the IV and DV.
Experimental design	How the participants are used in the conditions of an experiment.
Expertise	Competence, skill or knowledge in a particular area.
Extraneous variable (EV)	A variable that is not the IV but that might affect the DV. If EVs are not controlled, the researcher cannot be certain what caused any change that occurs in the DV.
Eye contact	When two people are looking at each other's eyes at the same time.
False memories	Remembering something that has never happened but feels as if it did.
Fiction	When an object, colour or movement is perceived but the construction is not actually there.
Field experiment	An experiment that is carried out in a naturally occurring environment.
Fight or flight response	An automatic physiological reaction to threats that triggers the ANS to release adrenalin. This in turn causes the body to take a number of steps so that an individual is ready for action.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Fixed mindset	Belief that ability and achievement are due to genetics and unchanging factors and that no amount of trying will alter this.
fMRI scan	Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging: a machine scans the brain using radio waves to measure blood supply and identifies the magnetic activity of water molecules in active brain cells to show which parts of the brain or body are functioning at that time.
Formal operational	Being able to reason in a way that uses logic and abstract thinking.
Fraction	Part of a whole number.
Frequency table	A type of table that is used to display data systematically in order to show how often something occurs.
Frontal lobe	One of the four major lobes of the cerebral cortex, the frontal lobe is at the front of the brain and controls cognitive processes such as thought and memory.
Gender	A person's sense of being either male or female, generally identified by social behaviours and cultural roles.
Genetic vulnerability	Having a biological predisposition/susceptibility towards developing conditions or disorders that can be hereditary.
Growth mindset	Belief that ability and achievement are due to hard work and can be increased through effort
Height in plane	Distant objects are seen or shown as being higher in the visual field in relation to items that are nearer.
Hereditary	Being passed genetically from parent to child.
Histogram	A type of graph that is used to display the frequency of groups of continuous data. Numerical values are represented by the height or length of lines or rectangles but there are no gaps between the bars and they are arranged in a logical order.
Holistic	The belief that all the parts of something (eg human behaviour) are connected and are only fully able to be understood by looking at the 'bigger picture' or referring to the whole.
Hypothesis	A precise, measurable and testable statement about the relationship between the (independent and dependent) variables that are being investigated.
Independent variable (IV)	The thing that is varied or changed by a researcher to see if affects the DV.
Inference	Reaching a conclusion based on the information you have before you and your past experiences. Our inferences are not always correct as we may not have the 'whole picture'.
Inhibition	A neurotransmitter binding with a receptor on the next neuron and decreasing the likelihood that the next neuron will fire an electrical impulse.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Innate	Inborn or genetic, rather than learned.
Instructions	Written or spoken information provided to participants before and during an experiment.
Interference	Forgetting information because other memories get in the way, this is especially likely to occur if two memories are very alike.
International Classification of Diseases (ICD)	A globally used list of symptoms and features of physical and mental health problems. Provides standard measures for diagnosis.
Inter-observer reliability	The extent to which the record sheets of two or more people carrying out an observation, match one another.
Interpretive cortex	Area of the brain where memories, or our interpretations of them, are stored.
Interventions	Actions taken to improve a physical or psychological disorder.
Interview	An investigative method where data is collected by directly asking questions of an individual or group. Interviews can vary in their degree of structure.
Isolation	The feeling of loneliness or being distant from others.
Laboratory experiment	An experiment that is carried out in an unnatural, controlled environment.
Language	A system of communication used by a specific group of people, unique to humans.
Language areas (of the brain)	An area of the cerebral cortex involved with language. Includes Wernicke's area in the temporal lobe and Broca's area in the frontal lobe.
Learned	Abilities or characteristics gained through experience.
Learning	Knowledge picked up through education, experience, making associations and observing others.
Learning styles	The different ways that a person can pick up and process information and knowledge.
Linear perspective	When parallel lines appear to converge or join together at some point in the distance.
Localised function	Different areas of the brain that are responsible for specific behaviours or functions.
Long-term store Majority influence	Memory store that has a very large capacity and holds information for a very long time. When the opinions or behaviours of a large number of people influence the opinions or behaviours of a smaller group of people. This usually results in conformity.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Mean	The average of a group of numbers, calculated by adding up all the numbers, then dividing by how many numbers there are.
Median	The middle number of a group of numbers, taken as the average of the two middle numbers when there is an even amount of numbers.
Mental health	An individual's emotional and psychological wellbeing; enables one to cope and function in everyday life and society.
Mental health problems	Diagnosable conditions that affect an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviours, making them less able to cope and function in everyday life and society.
Misinterpreted depth cues	When binocular or monocular depth cues are not understood accurately.
Mode	The number that appears most frequently in a group of numbers.
Modern living	The way of life for people in a time where there is advanced science, technology, engineering, etc.
Monocular depth cue	Ways of perceiving depth or distance that will work with just one eye.
Morality	Values and principles about the difference between right and wrong or good and bad.
Motion parallax	Close objects in our visual field seem to move more than objects that are further away in our visual field.
Motivation	Physiological and psychological drives and needs that we experience and that can affect a person's choices, actions and perception.
Motor area (of the brain)	(Also known as the primary motor cortex, or M1). An area of the frontal lobe involved with movement.
Motor neuron	Nerve cells that carry messages from the CNS to the muscles to make them to move.
Movement	Changing your body's location or position.
Natural experiment	Research that is carried out into the effect that changes in the IV has on the DV, but in which it is nature or other factors outside the control of the researchers that assigns people to the conditions of the IV, such as their age or gender.
Nature	Refers to the argument that characteristics and behaviours are genetically influenced.
Negative correlation	An inverse relationship between two variables – when one variable decreases, the other increases.



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Negative schemas	A pessimistic cognitive model/mental framework about the self, the world and the future based on previous information and experiences. Leads individuals to focus on what is bad when seeking to understand new information.
Neonates	New-born babies, less than a month old.
Neurological damage	Damage or impairment to the nervous system that affects the ability of neurons to function properly. Resulting in changes in behaviour and/or loss of function.
Neuronal growth	When a neuron frequently excites another neuron, it results in change or development in one or both of the neurons.
Neuron	A particular type of nerve cell that is involved in generating and transmitting electrical impulses.
Neurotransmitters	A brain chemical that is released across the synaptic cleft by one neuron, and picked up by the next neuron. Can cause excitation or inhibition.
No correlation	When there is not any relationship between variables.
Non-verbal communication	Sending and receiving messages without using words.
Normal distribution	A symmetrical arrangement of data in which the majority of values are grouped in the centre and the rest taper off towards each end, forming a bell-shaped curve.
Null hypothesis	A hypothesis that states that there is no relationship and that none of the variables will affect any other variables.
Nurture	Refers to the argument that characteristics and behaviours are influenced by upbringing, environment and experiences.
Obedience	Following the direct orders given by someone who is seen as being in/having authority.
Observation study	An investigative method where researchers collect data about people's behaviour by watching them and recording what they see.
Occipital lobe	One of the four major lobes of the cerebral cortex, the occipital lobe is at the back of the brain and is where visual information is processed.
Occlusion	When an object covers part of another object, this makes it appear to be closer.
Open posture	Adopting a position in which the arms are not folded across the body and legs are not crossed. May indicate being relaxed or being in agreement.
Parietal lobe	One of the four major lobes of the cerebral cortex, the parietal lobe is at the top of the brain and is responsible for integrating information from other areas to form complex behaviours.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Peer	People who are from the same social group, same age group, or who have the same social status, background, abilities or qualifications.
Peer influence	The effect that those who are similar to us can have on our opinions, behaviours and choices.
Percentage	A number or ratio stated as a fraction of 100.
Perception	How we organise, interpret and make sense of the sensory information that we receive from the world around us.
Perceptual set	A tendency or inclination to observe some aspects of sensory information from the world around us, but to not notice other aspects of it.
Peripheral nervous system (PNS)	A system of nerve fibres that connects and relays information between the central nervous system and the rest of the body. It is made up of the SNS and the ANS.
Personality	The characteristics or qualities that make up an individual's unique way of being.
Personal space	The physical distance we like to have between us and others so that we feel comfortable.
PET scan	Positron Emission Tomography: measures the activity of cells in different parts of the body by detecting a radioactive dye which is absorbed by tissue and organs after being injected or swallowed.
Positive engagement	Being curious, interested and motivated in studies, work or life in general.
Postural echo	Mirroring or having a similar body position to another person. May indicate being in agreement or friendliness.
Posture	The positioning of the body when standing or sitting.
Praise	Expressing approval or admiration for someone or something.
Prediction	A statement that is made about likely outcomes, before anything has actually taken place.
Pre-operational	Being unable to apply logic and reasoning to solve problems.
Primary data	First-hand responses/information that researchers have collected directly from the participants in an investigation that has been specifically collected for that investigation.
Primacy effect	When more of the first information received is recalled than later information.
Procedural memory	Stored knowledge and information that we use for carrying out complex motor skills.
Properties	Attributes or qualities that are associated with something.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Prosocial behaviour	Actions that are intended to help and benefit others.
Proximity	How nearby or far away something is.
Qualitative data	Data that is descriptive and non-numerical, eg verbal or written answers to interview questions.
Qualitative methods	An investigative method that collects descriptive data rather than numerical data.
Quantitative data	Data that is numerical, eg totals or tallies of observed behaviour categories.
Quantitative methods	An investigative method that collects numerical data.
Questionnaire	A set of questions about a topic that is given to participants in order to gather information/data.
Randomisation	Using chance (eg tossing a coin) to decide order in an investigation.
Random sample	People who are members of the target population who all have the same chance of being selected.
Range	The difference between the smallest and largest values in a set of data.
Ratio	The relationship between two amounts that shows how many times the first number is contained within the second.
Recall	To bring information or past experiences back into one's mind (similar to 'retrieval').
Recency effect	When more of the last information received is recalled than earlier information.
Recognition	By retrieving a memory, you are able to identify something or someone, previously known to you in some way.
Reconstructive memory	Changing or filling in gaps in our recollection of experiences or information so that it makes more sense to us.
Reductionist	The belief that something (eg human behaviour) is only fully able to be understood by simplifying it to its most fundamental and basic parts.
Relative size	The larger objects in the visual field appear to be closer than the smaller objects.
Relay neuron	A nerve cell that passes messages within the CNS.
Reproduction	The sexual or asexual process that allows humans, animals, plants, etc, to make young of the same kind.
Retinal disparity	The difference between the sensory information received through each eye which is the result of the slightly different angles they have of the world. The more disparity the further away an image/object is.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Retrieval	Recovering information from a memory store.
Reuptake	A neurotransmitter being reabsorbed after it has been used during synaptic transmission.
Sadness	A common emotional reaction which involves feeling sorrow in response to an unpleasant, hurtful or unhappy experience or memory.
Sample	A small group of people who represent the target population and who are used by the researchers in their investigation.
Sampling methods	Procedures used by researchers to attain a small group of people from the target population to be a part of their investigation.
Scatter diagram	A type of graph for representing the strength of relationship between variables.
Schema	A mental framework we have of what we already know and believe about the world around us. These frameworks are based on previous information and experiences, helping us to organise and understand new information that we receive.
Secondary data	Second-hand information that researchers have collected from places such as public records or investigations published by other researchers.
Self-confidence	A sense of trust in your own capabilities, qualities, opinions and choices.
Self-efficacy	The belief in your own capabilities to succeed at a task or to produce certain levels of performance.
Self-help groups	A number of individuals who gather together in order to provide mutual support for one other.
Self-management programmes	Educational programmes in addition to regular treatment and disease-specific education that are aimed at supporting and empowering people so that they can take responsibility for their own wellbeing.
Semantic memory	Recollections of general knowledge rather than personal experiences or events.
Sensation	Information from the world around us that we receive through our sense organs.
Sensorimotor	Learning occurs through information received through the senses and by engaging in physical activities.
Sensory deprived	An animal or human who receives limited or no information from one or more sensory organs.
Sensory neuron	A nerve cell that picks up information from sense receptors, like the skin, and carries it to the CNS.
Sensory processing	The brain and nervous system receives sensory information from the world around us and turns it into appropriate responses.



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Sensory store	Memory store for information received from the senses. Has a very large capacity but holds information for a very short period of time.
Serial position curve	A graph that shows the results of a serial position experiment and the serial position effect.
Serial position effect	Recall of a list of words in which the words at both the beginning and end of the list are well recalled but those in the middle are not recalled well. This effect demonstrates that the likelihood of recall of a word depends on its position in a list of words.
Serotonin	A neurotransmitter that is commonly regarded as a brain chemical responsible for mood stability.
Short-term store	Memory store that has a capacity of approximately seven pieces of information and in which information is held for a limited period of time.
Signalling	A gesture, expression, action or sound that passes information.
Significant figures	All of the non-zero digits of a number and the zeros that occur between them or that are the final zeros that express the accuracy/magnitude for a measurement.
Size constancy	A tendency or inclination to perceive an object as being the same size, regardless of whether it is nearby or far away.
Social care	Providing personal care, protection or social support services to in-need or at-risk children and adults.
Social factors	External events which may affect a person's behaviour and choices.
Social influence	The effects that other people can have on our opinions or behaviour.
Social loafing	The tendency of individuals to make less of an effort when they are working collectively with others than when they are on their own.
Society	A number of people who live together in a defined area or country and who share common values, laws and customs.
Somatic nervous system (SNS)	A system of sensory and motor neurons that relay sensory information to and from the CNS.
Somatosensory area (of the brain)	An area of the parietal lobe that is involved with the perception of touch, pain, pressure, etc.
Standard form	(Also known as Scientific notation) is a way of writing down numbers that are very big, or too small to be conveniently written in decimal form.
Standardised procedures	A same method and set of instructions are used for all participants in the same condition when carrying out a study.
Status	A person's rank, social or professional position.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Stigma	People, behaviours or features that are not approved of and are seen as wrong or shameful by others.
Storage	Holding information in the memory system for use at some point in the future.
Stratified sample	People are selected proportionally from a number of relevant subgroups within the target population.
Stroke	A sudden interruption to the blood supply in a part of the brain that is caused by a blockage of a blood vessel leading to part of the brain or by bleeding into the brain.
Substance	A solid, powder, liquid, or gas with particular properties. Substances such as drugs, alcohol and tobacco may be misused or abused.
Substance abuse	Using a substance in a way that is harmful or dangerous, often the result of consistent use or misuse.
Substance misuse	Using a substance in ways, or in quantities, that may be damaging and that is different to the recommended manner of use.
Survival	Continued existence.
Symptoms	Physical or mental features that are seen as indicating a condition, disease or disorder.
Synapse	The small gap between two neurons that allows signals to pass between them.
Synaptic transmission	Messages are passed from one neuron to another by sending neurotransmitters across the synaptic gap so that they can be picked up by the receptors on the next neuron.
Systematic sample	People are selected from a larger population according to a fixed interval, eg every nth person on a list.
Target population	The large group of people the researcher wants to study and from which the sample is selected
Temporal lobe	One of the four major lobes of the cerebral cortex, the temporal lobe is an area of the brain that is responsible for things such as comprehension and creation of spoken language.
Territory	Area defended against others by individuals or groups of animals or humans.
Thalamus	The part of the brain that relays sensory information to the cerebral cortex and acts as a centre for pain perception.
Therapies	Treatments that are used in order to relieve symptoms or heal a condition, disease or disorder.
Thought	The cognitive activity of thinking is a mental process which includes reasoning, considering, developing ideas and forming opinions.



Psychology Key Vocabulary



Touch	Physical contact between people. Can be understood as a form of non-verbal communication.
Unipolar depression	A mood disorder that results in people feeling continually sad, losing interest and enjoyment in everyday life and having reduced energy and activity levels.
Variable	Something that can vary or change.
Verbal communication	Sending and receiving messages using words.
Verbaliser	Someone whose preference is to process information by speaking and listening.
Visualiser	Someone whose preference is to process information by looking at it.
Visual area (of the brain)	(Also known as the primary visual cortex or V1). An area of the occipital lobe involved with vision.
Visual cues	Information from the world around us about distance, movement, etc.
Visual illusion	Whereby an image appears to be other than it actually is because of an incorrect or mistaken interpretation of sensory information from the eyes.
Womb	Part of the lower body of a female mammal where young are conceived and where they develop before birth.