GLASGOW 2025

Scoping out potential therapeutic targets in the treatment of dissociation

TOWARDS A PROCESS-BASED APPROACH TO DISSOCIATION

Dawant, Philippot & Douilliez

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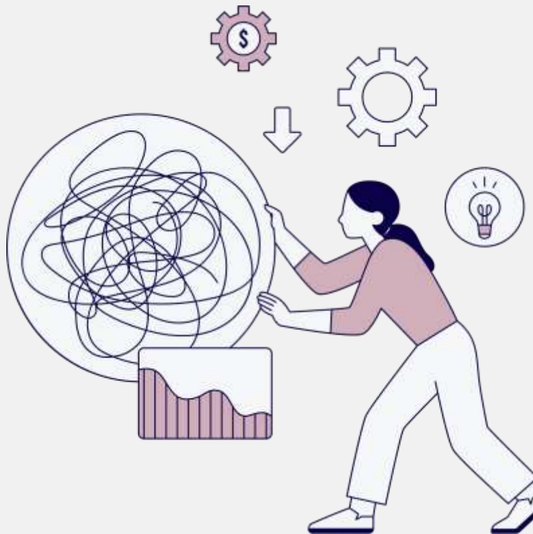
UCLouvain

Objective of the scoping review

- Informs Case Conceptualisation by :

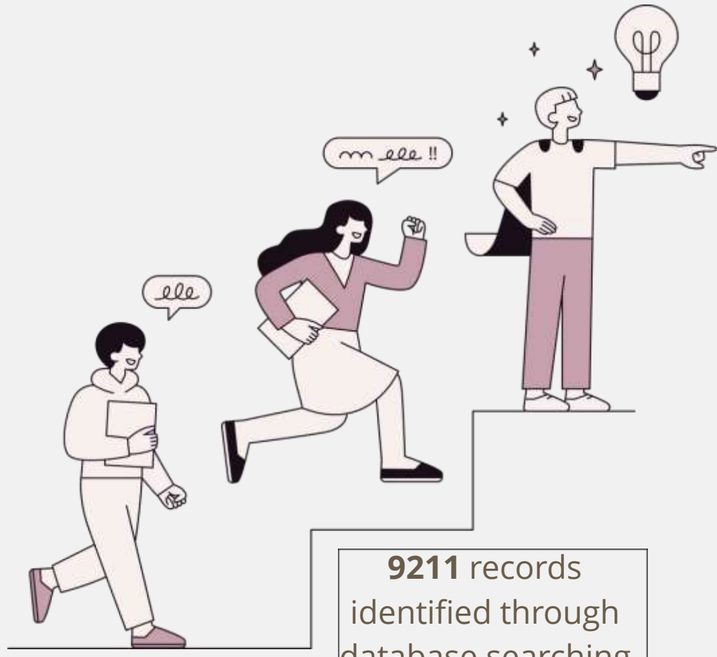
➥ **Identifying maintenance factors of dissociation**

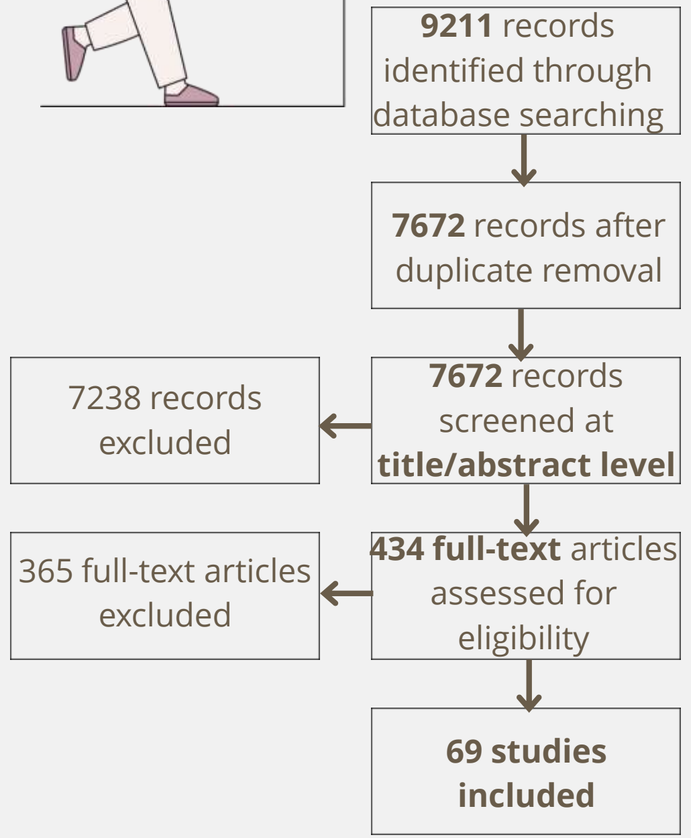
➥ To find **promising effective therapeutic targets for dissociation.**



Methods

- **Research Question**
  - *What are the existing **theoretical models of dissociation** in the literature aiming to **describe the development and/or maintenance of dissociation** in individuals with dissociative symptoms?*
- **Inclusion Criteria:**
  - Population : Studies on **people experiencing dissociation** (Excluded drug-induced dissociation)
  - Concept : Studies presenting **theoretical models or conceptualizations**
- **Screening Process:**
  - Double-blind screening for title/abstract and full texts





Methods



- **Data Extraction and Analysis**
  - Data extracted using a pre-designed extraction grid
  - Focused on **maintenance factors of dissociation** reported or identified by the authors, for each study

- Analysis criteria for maintenance factors : **Selection of psychological processes**
  - **Psychological elements**
  - **Modifiable factors**
  - **Potential targets for evidence-based interventions**

} **Promising therapeutic target in the process-based approach (Philippot et al., 2018)**

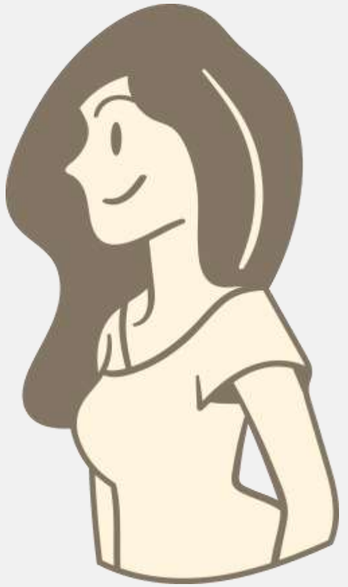
Results : Six categories of psychological processes



General processes	Specific psychological processes
Emotion (dys)regulation	• **Aversive cognitive perseverations**: rumination, **worry**, non-acceptance • **Disengagement strategies: behavioral avoidance**, distraction, experiential avoidance, and suppression • Automatic activation of conditioned responses and/or scripts (behavioral, emotional, cognitive)
Body awareness	• **Impaired interoceptive accuarcy** • Deficient sense of embodiment
Self concept disturbances	• **Absence of a sense of internal coherence**, clarity, identity coherence, stability, integration • Pluralism, differentiation in self-perception
Metacognition related to beliefs about cognitions	• Perceived lack of control over cognitive processes and conditioned actions/responses, leading to external attribution errors (**Source monitoring deficit**) • Thought control • Affect/distress intolerance
Dysfunctional cognitions	• **Positive** and negative **beliefs related to dissociation** • Negative beliefs related to emotions • Magical thinking
Cognitive impairment	• Executive control - Impulsivity - **Lack of attentional control** - Lack of flexibility

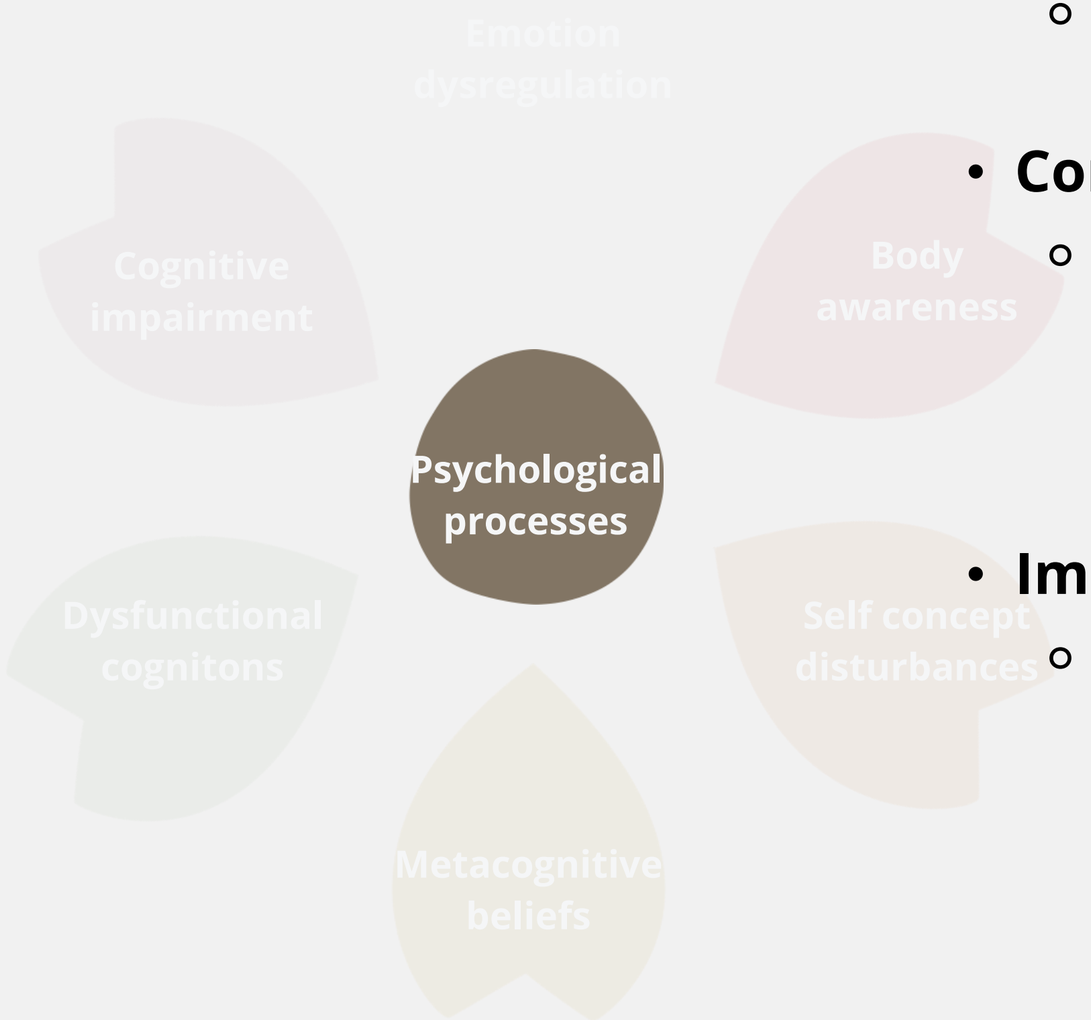
Clinical illustration





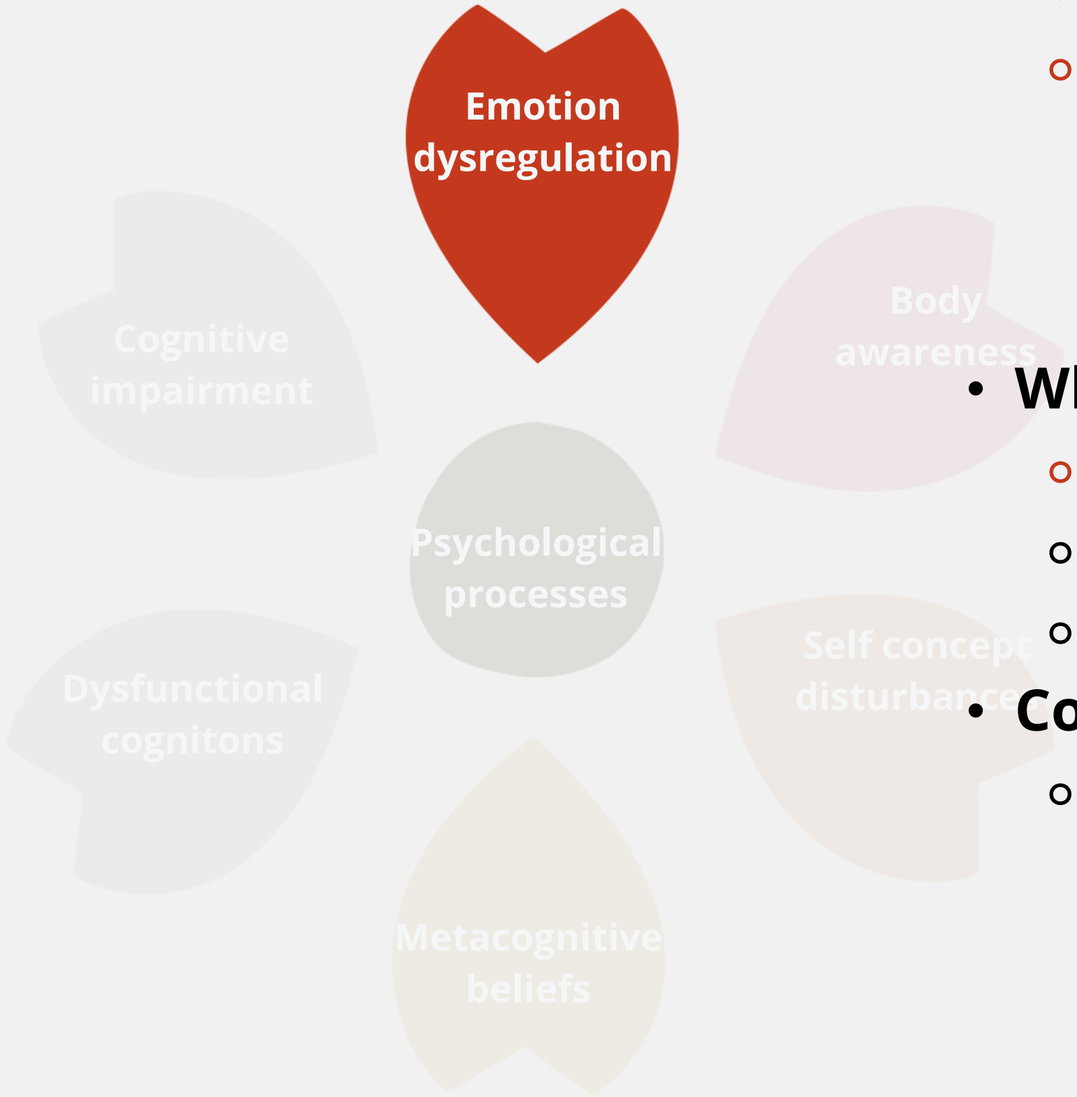


Emily’s Story : Case presentation



- **Who?**
  - Emily, 34, marketing professional, mother of two children
- **Complaint:**
  - Has been experiencing different kinds of dissociative experiences (emotional numbing, depersonalization, derealization, altered sense of self, absorption, etc.)
- **Impact:**
  - Dissociative experiences started to significantly impair her quality of life when she returned to work after her first postpartum

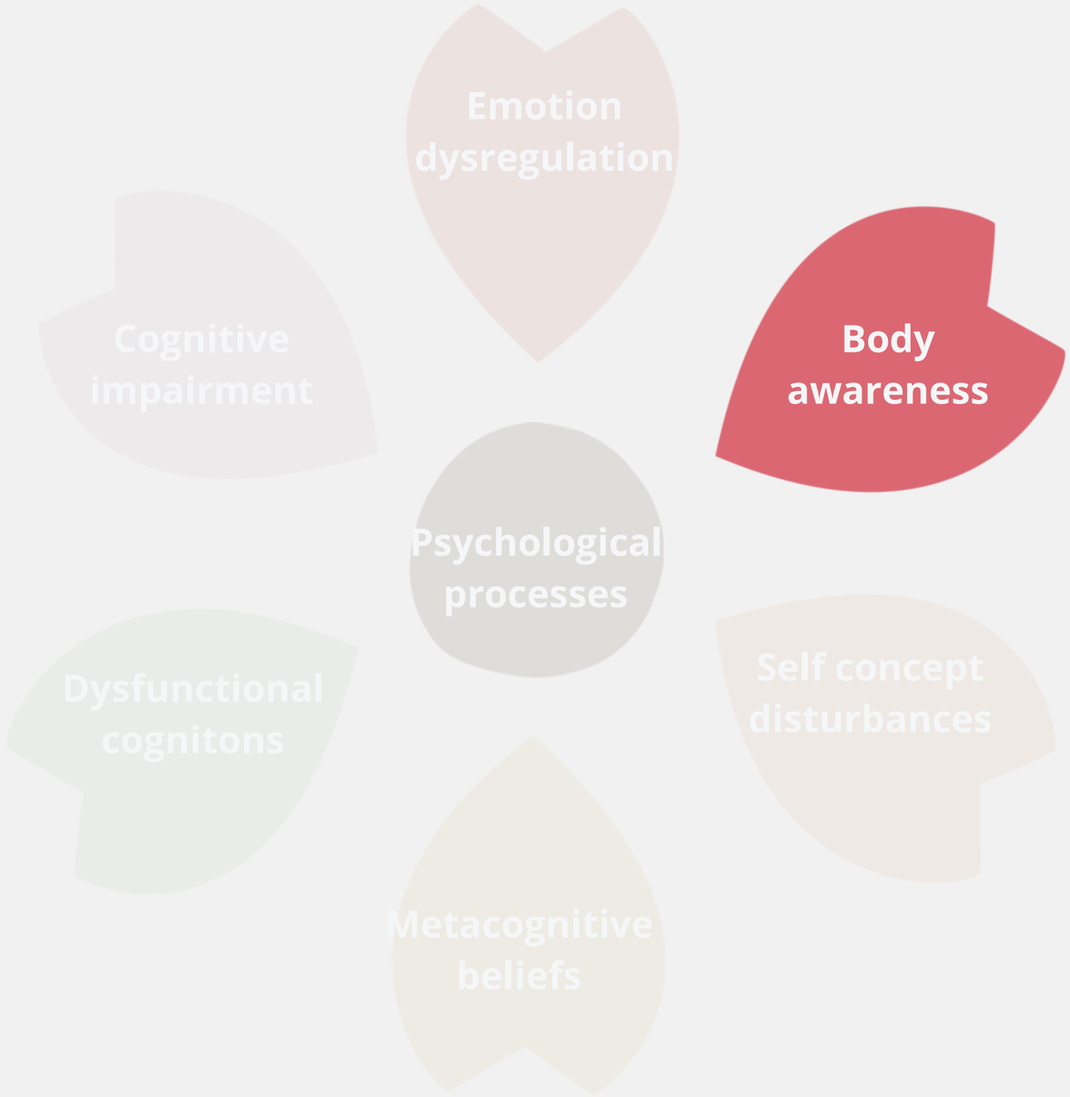
Emily’s Story



Disengagement & Aversive Perseveration:

- **In Stressful Social Work-related Situation**
  - Feels overwhelmed and anxious
  - **Mentally "disconnects" (experiential avoidance) - feeling detached**
    - “Like watching everything from outside”
    - “Not really there anymore”
- **What Happens Next?**
  - **Starts to ruminate (Adversive perseveration)**
  - Worries about “being stuck in this state”
  - Struggles to return to the present
- **Consequence**
  - Increased difficulty managing workload

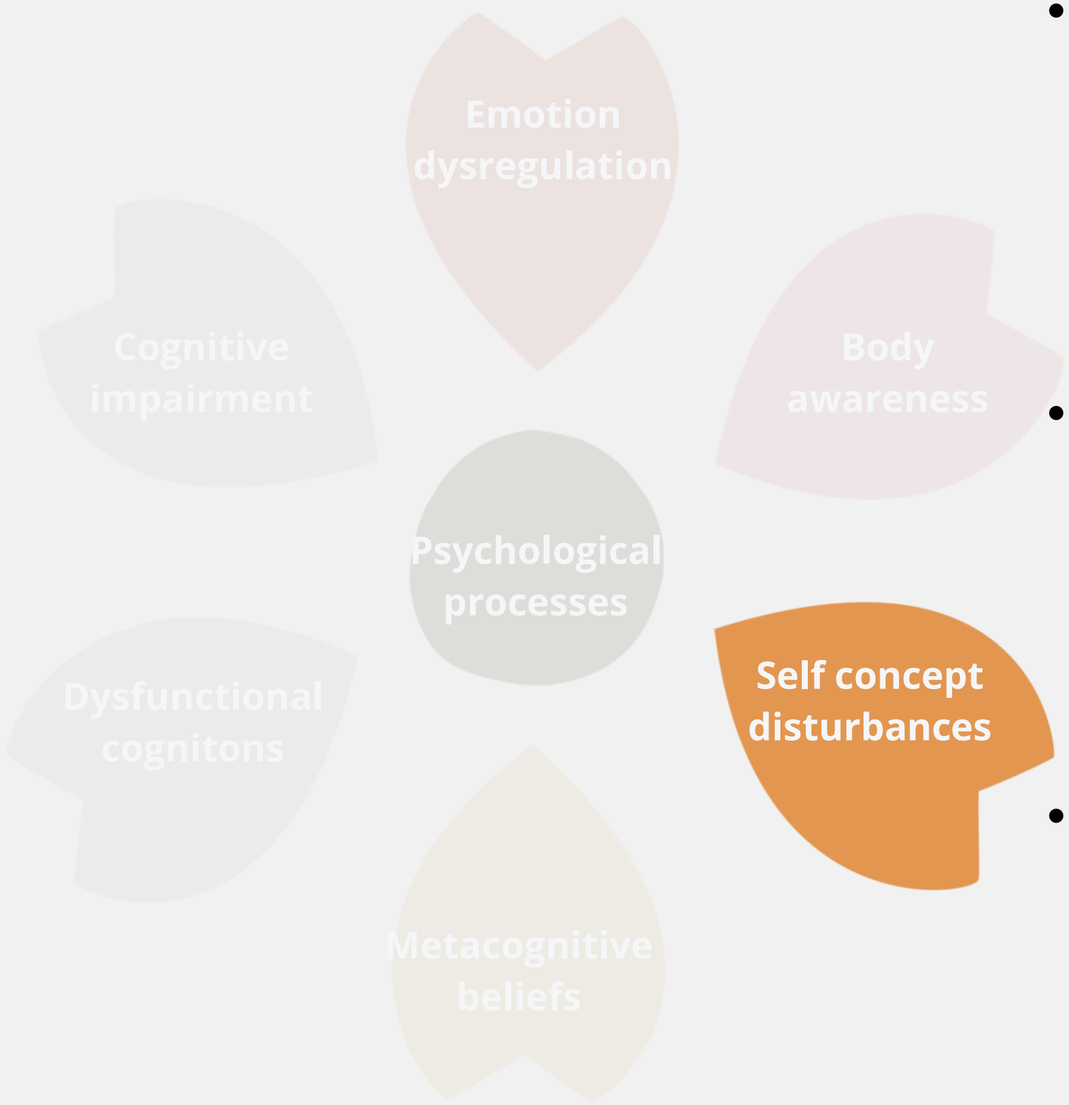
Emily's Story



Impaired Interoceptive Accuracy:

- **After a stressful workday, Emily often:**
  - **Fails to notice physical distress signals** (e.g., fast heart rate, muscle tension)
  - **Feels emotionally numb and disconnected from her body**
- **Consequences:**
  - Reduced emotional awareness
  - Difficulty regulating emotions

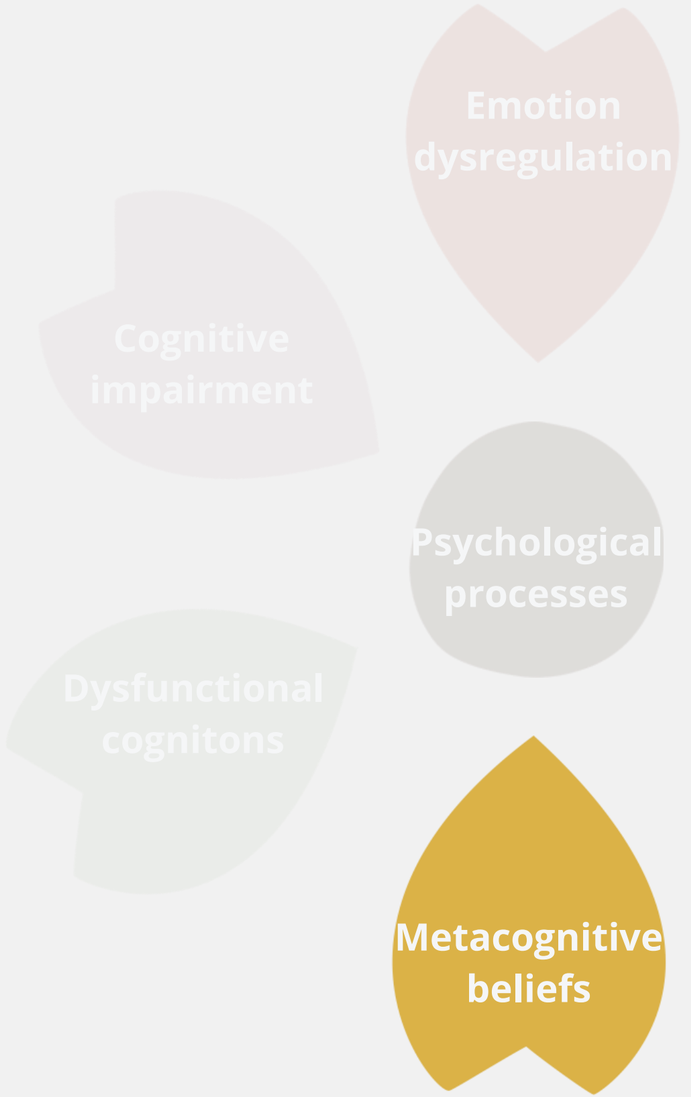
Emily’s Story



Lack of Sense of Internal Coherence:

- **Balancing demanding roles:** professional & mother of two
- **Manifestation:**
  - **Shifts in thoughts, feelings, behaviors between work and home**
  - At work: confident, organized, valued
  - At home: feelings of inadequacy and guilt
- **Key Challenge:**
  - **Feels like “switching between different versions” of herself** & Struggles to integrate these experiences into a unified self
  - Questions which version is the "real" her
- **Consequences:**
  - Persistent sense of fragmentation
  - **Difficulty maintaining stability, meaning, and continuous personal narrative across roles**

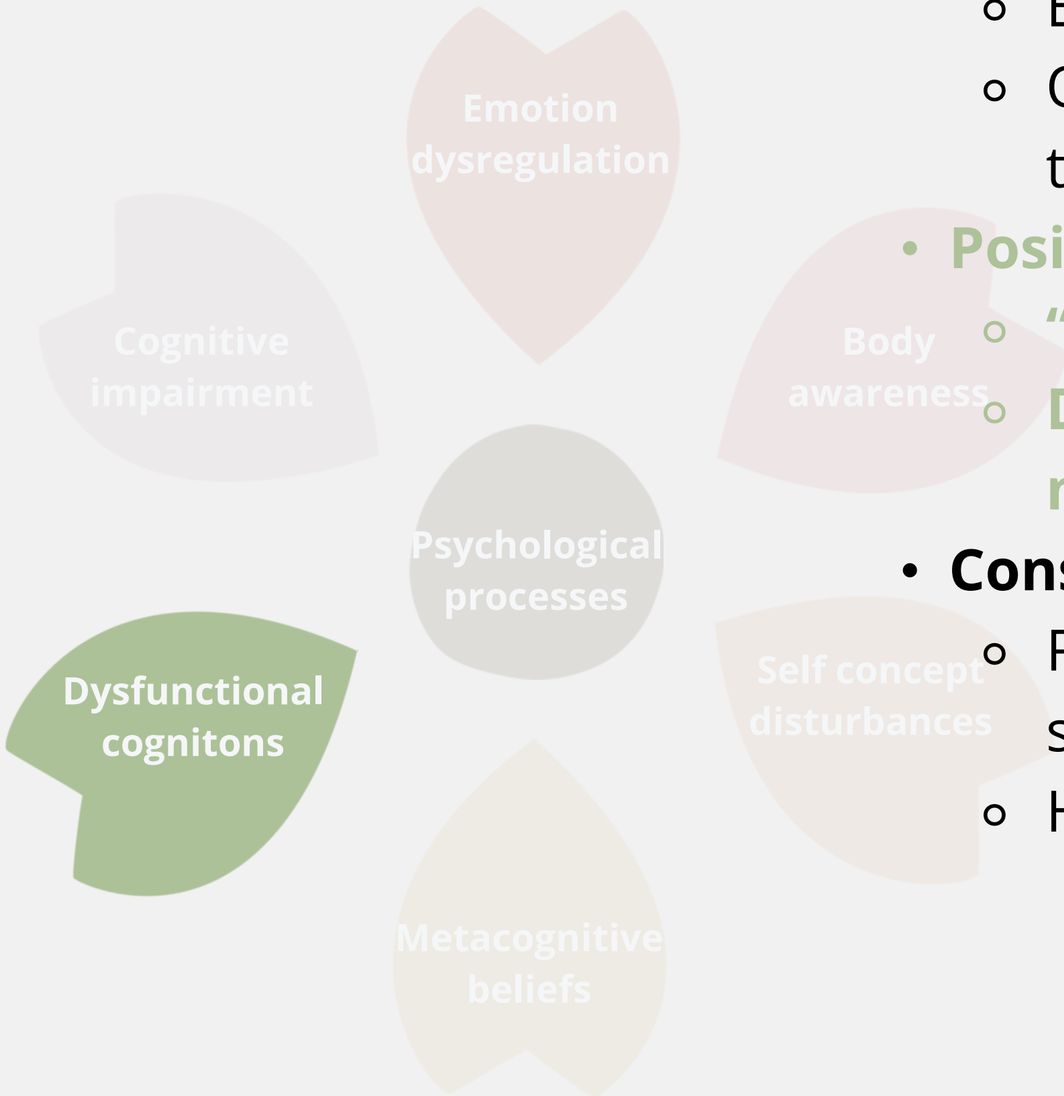
Emily's Story



Source Monitoring Deficit (Perceived lack of control over cognitive processes and conditioned actions/responses, leading to external attribution errors):

- **In a context of Self-critical thoughts**
  - Feeling of guilt
- **Key Issue:**
  - **These thoughts feel involuntary and foreign**
  - **Emily misattributes them as coming from an external force or "another part" of herself**
  - Struggles to recognize these arise from her own internal conflict
- **Consequences:**
  - Deepens her sense of fragmented selves and lack of internal coherence
  - Increases feelings of losing control over thoughts and emotions

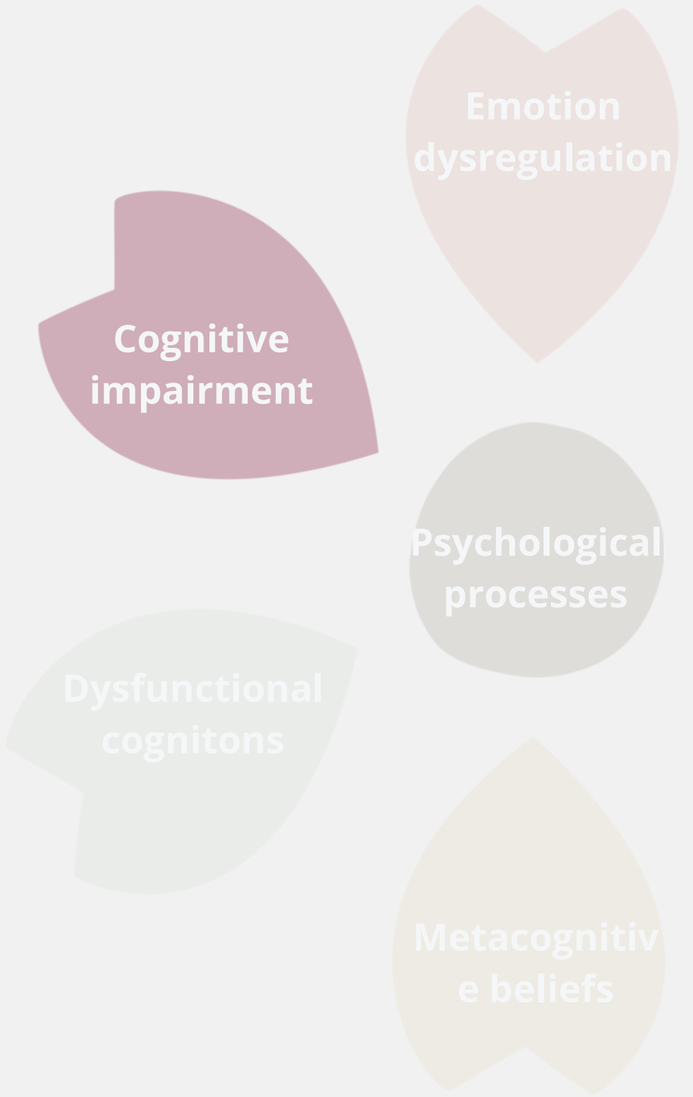
Emily’s Story



Positive Beliefs About Dissociation:

- **Background:**
  - Emily was labeled “too sensitive” as a child
  - Over time, she learned to “shut down” her feelings through dissociation
- **Positive Belief:**
  - **“When I disconnect, I keep from getting hurt”**
  - **Dissociation seen as a protective coping mechanism**
- **Consequences:**
  - Reinforces her use of dissociation in overwhelming situations
  - Helps her avoid emotional pain

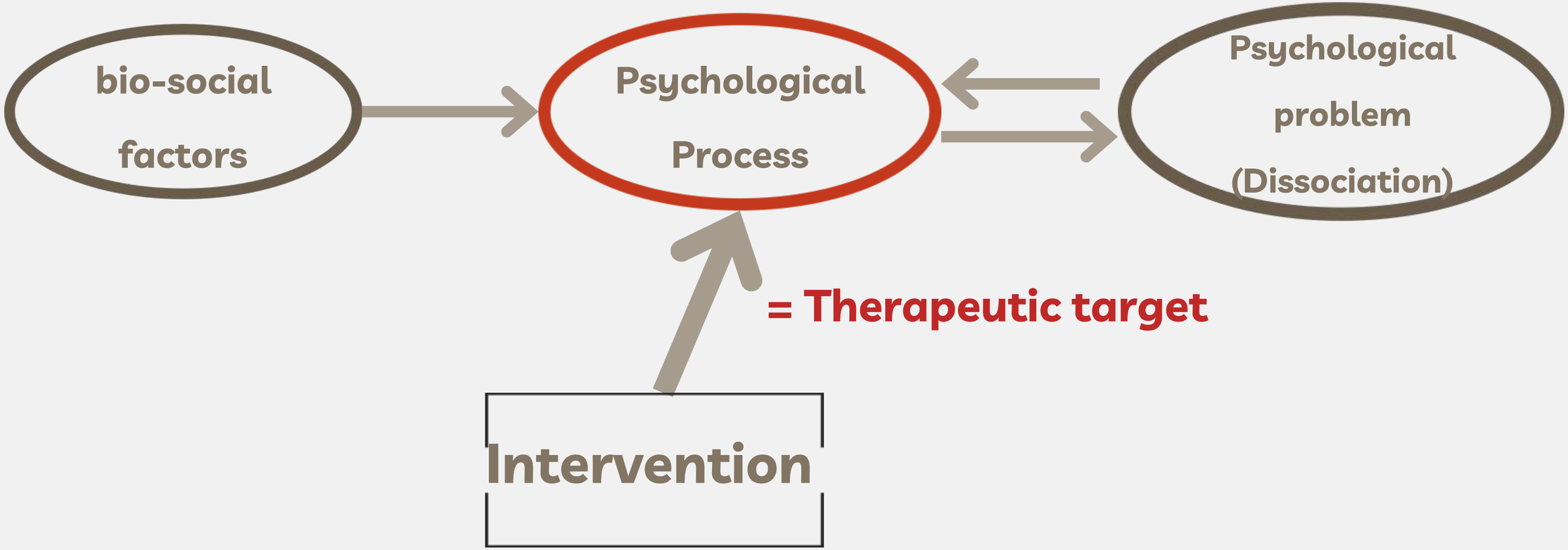
Emily’s Story



Lack of Attentional Control:

- **During high-pressure work periods:**
  - Emily **struggles to maintain concentration and switch tasks**
  - Experiences frequent **"zoning out" episodes**
- **When concentration saturates:**
  - She **loses focus and cannot complete responsibilities** effectively
  - Sometimes these episodes extend into prolonged dissociative states
- **Consequences:**
  - Feelings of unreality
  - Further impaired attention and workload management

What is next ?

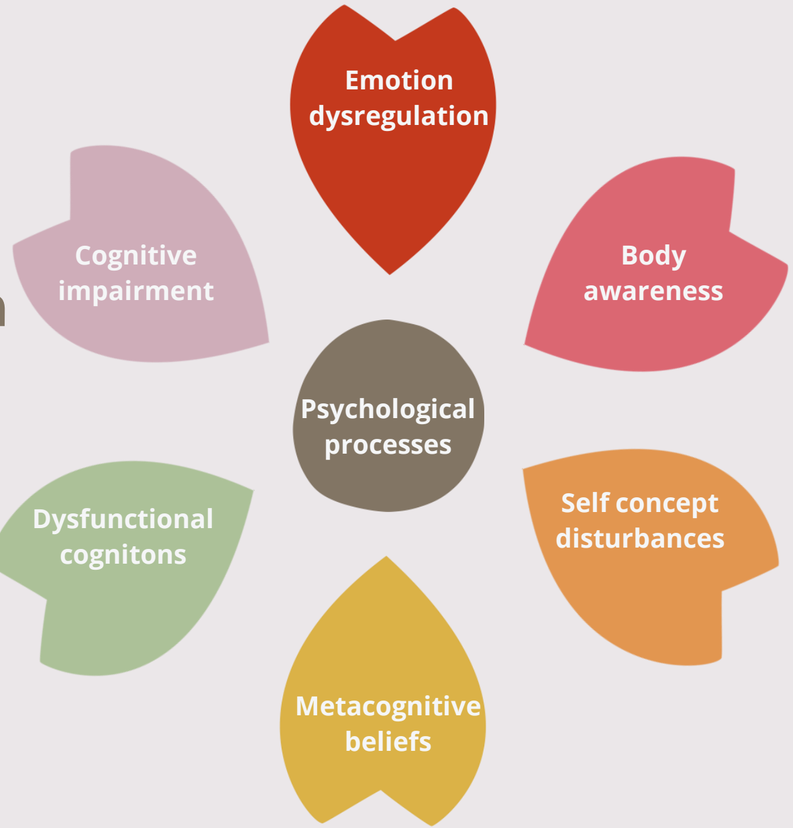

bio-social
factors
Psychological
Process
Psychological
problem
(Dissociation)
= Therapeutic target
Intervention

Clinical implications and future perspectives

Psyc. processes categories	Emily's case psychological processes	Promising evidence-based interventions
Emotion (dys)regulation	Disengagement (avoidance) & Adversive Perseveration (worries)	• Prolonged exposure therapy (Craske et al., 2014) • Rumination-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Watkins, 2018)
Body awareness	Impaired Interoceptive Accuracy	• Module 6 in the Unified Protocol for Emotional Disorders covering "Understanding Physical Sensations." Barlow (2021)
Self concept disturbances	Lack of Internal Coherence	• Self-System Therapy (SST ; Strauman et al., 2017)
Metacognition related to beliefs about cognitions	Source Monitoring Deficit	• Metacognitive therapy (MT ; Wells, 2008)
Dysfunctional cognitions	Positive Beliefs About Dissociation	• Beck cognitive restructuring (CR; Clark, 2013)
Cognitive impairment	Lack of Attentional Control	• Attention Training Technique (ATT; Wells, 1990)

Take home message

- **Dissociation can be difficult to break down**
  - ➡ Complexe phenomenon for which we **lack evidence based interventions**
- One possible solution : **Targetting underlying processes**
  - ➡ This research contribute to highlight those processes
- Good news : **Evidence based interventions active on those process already exist**



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Thank you

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