Aphantasia and the impact on mental healthcare

Mental imagery – the ability to visualize in the "mind's eye" – is known to be associated with mental health: both in terms of exacerbating symptoms (e.g., intrusive negative imagery in post-traumatic stress disorder; PTSD) and alleviating them (e.g., imagery rescripting, positive imagery) in most common psychological therapies. Recently, it was discovered that ~4% of the population has a marked absence of mental imagery, or aphantasia. Due to the connection between imagery and mental health, scholars proposed that aphantasia may serve as a buffer against mental health conditions like PTSD. However, research in mental healthcare-seeking samples found that aphantasics report a similar rate of PTSD as the general population. Although aphantasics are unlikely to experience visual flashbacks, they maintain negative emotional flashbacks that greatly impact quality of life. Furthermore, due to the lack of a core, diagnostic symptom, aphantasics experience longer delays in both diagnosis and treatment. In treatment, aphantasics struggle to undergo common imagery-based therapeutic techniques, and the general lack of knowledge surrounding aphantasia can result in client-therapist misunderstandings. In this talk, I will outline the importance of raising awareness about aphantasia among the public and mental health practitioners, to ultimately improve personalised mental healthcare for individuals with this invisible difference.