

CBT MADE SIMPLE

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A QUICKSTART GUIDE TO COGNITIVE
BEHAVIORAL THERAPY

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This ebook is intended to be a quick start guide to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. While by no means a complete guide, it is a quick starter pack to begin to use CBT to improve your life and make it a habit. If you are interested in more on this follow me on mindbodycoach.org. Email me at john@mindbodycoach.org for more information

WHATEVER THE THINKER THINKS

“Whether a man thinks he can, or he thinks he can’t-he’s right”
Henry Ford

“As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.”

Proverbs 23:7

Perhaps the primary cause of emotional wellness is the outlook that a person has toward the events that take place in their life. Two people can be exposed to the same event and have an entirely different interpretation of what happened and, more significantly, how they are emotionally



impacted. In contemporary counseling this is sometimes referred to as

resiliency, or the ability to interpret an event in a way that empowers us rather than disempowers us. In other words our interpretation of events are more important than the event itself.

So how do you see the world? Is it friendly or hostile? Is it a “wonderful world,?” Or is it as Rocky says to his son, “a mean, nasty, place that will knock you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it.” Chances are that your answer to that is colored by the experiences that you had in life. People who have faced unfortunate circumstances tend to view the external world through the filter of their experience. While we can’t change the experiences that we’ve had we certainly can change the way that we interpret those events and the meaning that we attach to them. We all live by truths that we hold based on our upbringing, schooling, environmental exposures, and a host of other things that we may not even be aware of on a conscious level. Our truths however, are not necessarily true in a literal sense. Our personal “truth” is our interpretation in the meaning that we attach to outside events.

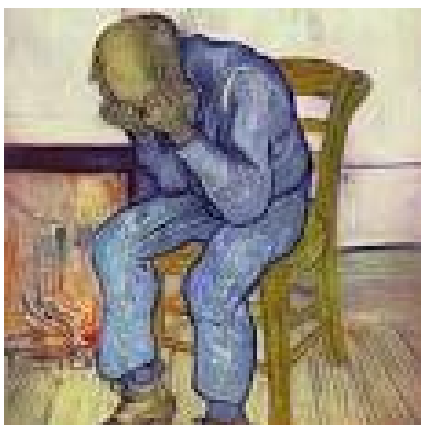
It is my intention to deal with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy over the course of this ebook quick start guide. Cognitive therapy is probably my favorite therapeutic intervention because it empowers clients and makes them self-sufficient. It is an action oriented therapeutic approach that has the ability to extend a therapy session beyond the counseling room, into the into the real world, where it can make a difference in a person’s life. Through the use of cognitive therapies, clients learn valuable skills that greatly increase the quality of their existence. Clients in a sense become their own therapist, learn how they view events, and begin to challenge long-held beliefs in a way that improves their interactions with their world.

Essentially we all live in two worlds. There is the external world of people, places, things, and life experiences. And there is the internal world of thoughts, feelings, emotions, fears, doubts etc. It is this internal world which shapes the meaning of our existence. Our subjective reality determines how we feel about virtually everything. Through the systematic use of cognitive therapies, clients learn to change their worldview in a way that serves them better. The ability to challenge long held beliefs is the beginning of emotional wellness, personal fulfillment, and happiness. This often makes therapy challenging as a client learns to accept responsibility for their feelings and their emotions. The “blame

game” ends and one learns to accept responsibility for their feelings and begins to redefine their worldview.

Perhaps no better example of the internal world experience is the life of Victor Frankl, a German psychiatrist and physician who survived a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War. Frankl’s story is chronicled in his biography called “Man’s Search for Meaning.” In it he describes how he survived the horrors of the Holocaust. He he vowed that no matter what happened to him, no matter what horrors he experienced, he would maintain a sense of control over how he mentally interpreted it and made sense of what he was experiencing. He felt that the only thing he absolutely had control over was his thoughts. What kept him going was his outlook, and sense of purpose. He vowed that he would survive so that he would be able to tell the outside world what he witnessed, and that the world would never forget.. “Man’s Search for Meaning” should be read by everyone who doubts that they can control what they think.

Feelings aren’t facts. What we think and believe is often merely our interpretation of something that’s happening in our external world. Ironically, in a criminal court case, the type of evidence that is most likely to be false is eyewitness testimony. People see what they expect to see, and people experience what they expect to experience. In other words, you get what you’re looking for. Through the introspection of counseling sessions clients learn to take



responsibility for both the actions and their beliefs and often find that their beliefs exert tremendous influence over their actions.

Watch yourself over the next few days and notice through your thoughts and words what beliefs you hold. Notice how frequently you and others get what they expect. Begin to challenge some of these beliefs and see if it improves your outlook and perceptions of your life.

IS YOUR THINKIN' STINKIN'?

A few years ago a Cognitive Behavioral therapist by the name of Michael Edelstein wrote a book called "Three Minute Therapy." While Cognitive Behavioral Therapy isn't quite that simple the title of the book illustrates a great point, we have the ability to resolve many of the problems that we face more easily than we might imagine. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy stresses that we can control, or at least challenge, dysfunctional thought patterns that shape the quality of our emotional landscape.

Most of us are not aware that we have literally hundreds of conversations with ourselves every day. For example, when you got out of bed this morning do you remember what you said to yourself? When you first looked at yourself in the bathroom mirror this morning you probably said something to yourself. There was an internal discussion that occurred so automatically that you probably didn't even notice. Having these kinds of conversations with yourself is normal. Everybody does it even if they not initially aware of it. Internal discussions such as, "I am not good enough," "I'll never get a better job," "I look disgusting," are examples of our thoughts working against us. If you examine your internal discussions you may find that you are your own worst critic, and

that you would never speak to anyone else the way that you speak to yourself!

In
Cognitive
Behavioral
Therapy this
kind of logic
is sometimes
called
distorted
thoughts or



dysfunctional thinking. Most cognitive behavioral interventions attempt to teach the client to identify and challenge their negative thinking patterns. Some simply refer to such logic “stinkin’ thinkin’.”

The following are some of the dysfunctional thinking patterns identified by psychologist David Burns, author of “Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy”:

1. All-or-nothing thinking – You see things in black-or-white categories. If a situation falls short of perfect, you see it as a total failure. When a young woman on a diet ate a spoonful of ice cream, she told herself, “I’ve blown my diet completely.” This thought upset her so much that she gobbled down an entire quart of ice cream.

2. Overgeneralization – You see a single negative event, such as a romantic rejection or a career reversal, as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using words such as “always” or “never” when you think about it. A depressed salesman became terribly upset when he noticed bird dung on the window of his car. He told himself, “Just my luck! Birds are always crapping on my car!”

3. Mental Filter – You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively, so that your vision of reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors a beaker of water. Example: You receive many

positive comments about your presentation to a group of associates at work, but one of them says something mildly critical. You obsess about his reaction for days and ignore all the positive feedback.

4. Discounting the positive – You reject positive experiences by insisting that they “don’t count.” If you do a good job, you may tell yourself that it wasn’t good enough or that anyone could have done as well. Discounting the positives takes the joy out of life and makes you feel inadequate and unrewarded.

5. Jumping to conclusions – You interpret things negatively when there are no facts to support your conclusion.

Mind Reading : Without checking it out, you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you.

Fortune-telling : You predict that things will turn out badly. Before a test you may tell yourself, “I’m really going to blow it. What if I flunk?” If you’re depressed you may tell yourself, “I’ll never get better.”

6. Magnification – You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings, or you minimize the importance of your desirable qualities. This is also called the “binocular trick.”

7. Emotional Reasoning – You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: “I feel terrified about going on airplanes. It must be very dangerous to fly.” Or, “I feel guilty. I must be a rotten person.” Or, “I feel angry. This proves that I’m being treated unfairly.” Or, “I feel so inferior. This means I’m a second rate person.” Or, “I feel hopeless. I must really be hopeless.”

8. “Should” statements – You tell yourself that things should be the way you hoped or expected them to be. After playing a difficult piece on the piano, a gifted pianist told herself, “I shouldn’t have made so many mistakes.” This made her feel so disgusted that she quit practicing for several days. “Musts,” “oughts” and “have tos” are similar offenders.

“Should statements” that are directed against yourself lead to guilt and frustration. Should statements that are directed against other people or the world in general, lead to anger and frustration: “He shouldn’t be so stubborn and argumentative!”

Many people try to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn’ts, as if they were delinquents who had to be punished before they could be expected to do anything. “I shouldn’t eat that doughnut.” This usually doesn’t work because all these shoulds and musts make you feel rebellious

and you get the urge to do just the opposite. Dr. Albert Ellis has called this “musturbation.” I call it the “shouldy” approach to life.

9. Labeling – Labeling is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of saying “I made a mistake,” you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” You might also label yourself “a fool” or “a failure” or “a jerk.” Labeling is quite irrational because you are not the same as what you do. Human beings exist, but “fools,” “losers” and “jerks” do not. These labels are just useless abstractions that lead to anger, anxiety, frustration and low self-esteem.

You may also label others. When someone does something that rubs you the wrong way, you may tell yourself: “He’s an S.O.B.” Then you feel that the problem is with that person’s “character” or “essence” instead of with their thinking or behavior. You see them as totally bad. This makes you feel hostile and hopeless about improving things and leaves very little room for constructive communication.

10. Personalization and Blame – Personalization comes when you hold yourself personally responsible for an event that isn’t entirely under your control. When a woman received a note that her child was having difficulty in school, she told herself, “This shows what a bad mother I am,” instead of trying to pinpoint the cause of the problem so that she could be helpful to her child. When another woman’s husband beat her, she told herself, “If only I was better in bed, he wouldn’t beat me.” Personalization leads to guilt, shame and feelings of inadequacy.

Some people do the opposite. They blame other people or their circumstances for their problems, and they overlook ways they might be contributing to the problem: “The reason my marriage is so lousy is because my spouse is totally unreasonable.” Blame usually doesn’t work very well because other people will resent being scapegoated and they will just toss the blame right back in your lap. It’s like the game of hot potato—no one wants to get stuck with it.

In therapy clients learn which of these dysfunctional thoughts are their default thoughts that get them into trouble emotionally and in their interactions with others. The first step is identifying what one says to themselves instinctively and automatically. I find that it gets complicated for clients to quickly recall these thoughts when needed. A simplified approach is to use acronyms that can be recalled and utilized easily and immediately with a little bit of training. A favorite acronym of mine is T

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F A C, short for think, feel, act, and consequences. In group counseling I like to put it on a whiteboard as a formula:

$$(T+F)+A=C$$

(T+F) are experiences in the internal world. A and C are experiences in the external world. So as you can see what goes on internally shapes the quality of the consequences that we get in the results that we receive. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy the internal experience, or the T + F, is identified as the area where problems occur. Our internal experiences, interpretations, biases, and expectations are where the problem originates in many areas of our lives. It can take quite a while for therapy client to be able to identify the 10 dysfunctional thoughts that David Burns proposes. It is far easier to remember the acronym T F A C if it is remembered as a word, “teefak.” Teefak, short, easy, memorable, and to the point. The way we think effects the way we feel which affects the way we act which leads to consequences. Once one understands the nature of the dysfunctional thoughts it becomes much easier to identify what’s going on in the real world by breaking down events with the teefak model. As Acceptance and Commitment Therapy teaches, it is necessary to get some separation from the internal events- the T and the F- before we act because there’s a pretty good chance our thoughts and feelings could be wrong.



So there it is, a brief overview of how to make cognitive behavioral therapy a little more practical and user-friendly. It doesn't have to be complicated and you don't have to spend 6 to 12 weeks on a couch talking about your

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relationship with your mother to get some benefits out of psychotherapy.

So that ends the second post on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Next time we'll examine how we can change deeply engrained thinking patterns.

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SO, WHAT'S IN YOUR WALLET?

So, what is in your wallet? We've all seen the commercial on television where comedian Jerry Stiller asks that question. The answer may have more to do with how you think than how much money you have. This is the third blog post in a three-part series on cognitive behavioral therapy for self-improvement (see posts from January 6 and January 9, 2014). In January 9 post, "Stinkin' Thinkin'", we discussed the T F A C model of cognitive therapy. In this post we are going to examine the various ways that we as humans "think." It's much more than self talk.



There are various ways by which we think. We are all familiar with self talk, the internal dialogue that becomes a part of our every waking moment. We literally "talk" to ourselves in an ongoing stream of

consciousness that never really stops. It is such a part of our existence that we usually don't even think of it, it occurs sometimes beneath our level of awareness. Of course, there are many ways that we can change negative self talk. Many are familiar with affirmations, which are upbeat slogans

and expressions that we say to ourselves such as “I can do it,” “I am a good person,” “you can do it,” and the ever popular, “I’m a good person, and dammit people like me!” While affirmations do have their place, positive self talk is only one method of changing the way we speak to ourselves.

An effective method of changing negative self talk is called the Cognitive Reframe. The Cognitive Reframe is simply looking at something in a way that serves us better. For example, if you’re running late for work on Monday morning, rather than get upset the reframe technique would be something along the lines of “Well, I have more time to listen to sports talk radio,” or “Well at least I have a job to go to,” or some other way of describing the situation to yourself in a way that makes you feel better. A simple strategy for the reframe is to ask yourself “What’s good about this?” or “What’s positive about this?” While this almost may sound simplistic, it goes a long way towards changing how we feel about situations that could snowball into negativity. In traditional psychotherapy a reframe is often referred to as Cognitive Restructuring and a lot of research shows that it is a highly effective way of changing the way one feels. The premise behind all cognitive therapy is that the meaning we attach to events is more important than the event itself. Language is a huge part of how we attach meaning to events in our lives. Our perception becomes our reality.

Another way that we as humans “think” is through visual images. Most people are familiar with the term “in your mind’s eye.” The title of this article is based on a strategy that I use to convince people that we do in fact think through visual images. When asked the question “what’s in your wallet?” Most people inevitably will gaze off to either the right or the left and “see” in their mind in image of their wallet and then describe what’s in that wallet. They may not know the exact amount of money, but they know the color, what pictures they have, where their license or credit card may be, and a lot of other information that they gather not with words but with a visual image that they have in their mind and can recall when asked. Another question I often use is, “what’s on your refrigerator?” or “what was the condition you left your bed in when you woke up this morning?” People usually get the idea after questions like these and realize that we do in fact think in visual images as well as with language patterns.

We also think in sounds, smells, tastes, and through a physical sense of touch. What’s the sound of an electric guitar?, Remember the smell of

your grandmother's house? What's the taste difference between a good and bad cup of coffee? Remember what it felt like after your last surgery? Changing these memories changes our interpretation of our experiences and thus the way we feel about them, ourselves, and the world around us.

So how can we use this knowledge to help us? With visual images a simple trick is to imagine the events in the third person, as if we were an actor on the screen of a movie visualizing ourselves outside of our own body. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy this is called becoming "the Observer." People quite often find that when they become the observer in their thoughts, how they feel as a result of those thoughts changes and they become more objective and less enmeshed in negative perceptions. In this way one can gain objectivity and have a more rational outlook about what otherwise might have been an emotionally disturbing recollection. With auditory recollections it can be helpful to change the quality, rate, and tone of that inner dialogue. Some find that by changing the disparaging internal remarks hearing them in the voice of a cartoon character takes some of the pain from that and neutralizes it. After all, it's hard to take Donald Duck seriously when he's telling you that you're too fat, too stupid, and are never going to amount to anything!

With a little imagination you can work out your own strategies to deal with negative self talk, disturbing visual images, smells, and tastes. Physical pain can often be controlled using cognitive strategies such as changing how we describe our pain to ourselves, or either enlarging or minimizing

the painful area in our mind. If a sharp pain in a small area is cognitively converted into a dull pain over a larger area then the internal perception of the pain will change as well. Cognitive strategies, with practice, can be quite effective in pain management.

So if you study your preferred sensory modalities, I'm sure you can



find many ways of thinking that are unique to you. When you experience disturbing thoughts, or memories, or negative self talk, try to find ways that you can think about them differently by altering your perceptions. The beauty of this knowledge is that you now have a strategy that you can call on instantly when needed to change negative perceptions. Cognitive Therapy is a skill and using these strategies as often as possible keeps them sharp and available when you need them. While without doubt psychotherapy has great value, there is a lot that you can do for yourself to improve the quality of your life. Give it a try!

THE DANGERS OF SELF INFLICTED HEAD BUTTS

Are you a “yeah, but...” guy?



A Yeah But Guy is one who has an ongoing internal dialogue that is punctuated by the phrase “yeah but.” These two simple, yet deadly words prevent him from having, being, and doing literally thousands of things in his life. A Yeah But guy isn’t even aware that this is going on. This internal

process is so ingrained and part of his emotional makeup that he doesn’t even notice the impact that it has. We all know someone like this, you know, the person who says “Yeah but after hitting the lottery for \$15 million you’re only going to get \$7 million after taxes.” Another statement that can drive you crazy is, “See, I told you I couldn’t do it!” This guy lives his life waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for something bad to happen, and has earned nicknames like Debbie Downer, Negative Nancy, and other names that can’t be mentioned here.

So where does this come from? How does it develop? And, more

importantly why does it continue? Clearly some people have a harder time in life than others.

Life deals each of us a unique set of cards to play. In fairness, some Yeah But Guys may have had it harder than others during their walk of life. However, the Yeah But Guy gets fixated on the negative. This is actually a well



researched aspect of human behavior which is called Expectation Bias. The premise behind Expectation Bias is that we are prejudiced because of our experience and tend to notice what we expect to find. This is a naturally occurring phenomenon as our brains are wired towards the familiar. A great example of this is when you buy a new car. Whatever make or model you have suddenly appears to be everywhere. If you go out and buy that ragtop Jeep you begin to notice that ragtop Jeeps appear to be everywhere. A trip on the highway reaffirms this as your mind notices ragtop Jeeps which it would not have noticed in the past. Owning your own causes your brain to look for that which is familiar-and Jeeps start popping up everywhere! Naturally, the number of Jeeps on the road has not increased, but you are now more aware and are more likely to notice them.

Another way that Yeah But Guys create reinforcement for this is through a process called Selective Memory. Selective Memory is a process whereby we focus on past events that reinforce our current beliefs. For example if one holds the belief that "I am a failure," they are likely to focus on life experiences where they have failed and are likely to ignore their successes. Such thought processes become ingrained and set the Yeah But Guy up for more of the same. And since we tend to get what we expect, as Sonny Bono said, "the beat goes on," and the Yeah But Guy plods along unsatisfied and unfulfilled.



So how do we change this? The first step in changing all behaviors and attitudes is awareness. We cannot change if we are not aware

that something needs to change. In your own personal internal dialogue begin to notice how often you might use the phrase “yeah but.” You’d be surprised how frequently it creeps in and can be an automatic thought. You’ll soon begin to notice how frequently other people use the expression as well. The next step is challenging the logic of what follows the “yeah but.” Would it really be a disaster if you walked away with \$7 million after hitting the lottery for \$15 million? Should you really not enjoy today because it’s going to rain tomorrow? Should you not enjoy your life today because we’re all going to die anyway? I think you get the picture, the first step is noticing, and challenging this flawed logic.

If changing the thoughts is difficult then writing the thoughts out and answering the thoughts can be very beneficial. Thoughts have a tendency to become real things and putting thoughts on paper turns them into what they actually are, merely thoughts. Thoughts are not real, but can become powerful forces that influence the way we see the world and our ability to function in it.

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So take a look at this “Yeah But Syndrome” and see if it’s part of your mental makeup. If it is, then GET OFF YOUR BUT and change it!

COGNITIVE WHAT?

The human brain is wired to function best in a logical, orderly way. We act and feel our best when our inside world of thinking and feeling is consistent with the external world in which we live. The term cognitive dissonance refers to the feeling of discomfort that one gets when what we think and feel are in conflict with what we do. The reality is that who and what we think we are is sometimes in contradicted by what we do. Most people strive to be good persons, healthy in mind and body. We tended to struggle when our actions contradict ourselves beliefs.

Cognitive dissonance was first studied in 1957 by psychologist Leon Festinger. His theory is based on the idea that the human mind seeks consistency of beliefs with actions. Festinger was studying a cult that believed that the earth was going to be destroyed by a flood, and the emotional impact on its members when the flood did not occur. There were two general responses, one group accepted that their calculations were wrong, left the cult, and moved on with their lives. Most chalked it up to being young and foolish in their beliefs. A second group, however, began to reevaluate and reinterpret their calculations. This second group came to the conclusion that the world was not destroyed because of the faithfulness of the cult members. It was their beliefs and convictions-which were correct all along-that persuaded God to save the world. The second group, experiencing cognitive dissonance, created a new belief that alleviated the discomfort and painful emotions that would have otherwise occurred.

All humans engage in cognitive dissonance from time to time, even healthy ones. Most of the time they are not quite as dramatic as a world

ending flood. They can be problematic, however. Any time our behaviors conflict with our beliefs, we run the risk of cognitive dissonance. If you sneak a cigarette because you don't want your kids to see you smoking, that uncomfortable feeling you have is probably cognitive dissonance. If you eat an entire pizza after a two-hour workout at the gym, that feeling may be cognitive dissonance. You consider yourself a kind person, but get angry when the guy panhandling for change asks you for money. Could result in cognitive dissonance. In each case your beliefs about yourself are inconsistent with your actions. We tend to come up with false, yet logical, ways to explain why we do what we do. "I only smoke three cigarettes per day," or "I worked out hard, so I deserve it," or "Let the bum go out and get a job," are ways that we explain the above situations to ourselves.

The rationalizations that we tell ourselves are usually not a problem, and may even serve a protective factor. We all feel cognitive dissonance to



a certain extent. It may be better to rationalize that entire pizza you ate, as opposed to believing that you are fat slob, and that working out and trying to get fit is futile. It is when cognitive dissonance causes deeper emotional pain that these feelings need to be addressed. Some

people simply cannot let go of their cognitive dissonance, and focusing on these conflicting feelings can become a habit, leading to emotional conflict and feelings of guilt and shame.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is one of the better ways to combat cognitive dissonance. Like most human behaviors, self awareness is the most important factor. In many cases knowing the relation between your thoughts and your actions can create valuable insights. Rather than think of the uncomfortable feeling as a self indictment, view it as a signal that you need to take a closer look at the connection between your values and your behavior. You are not a bad person, but some value you have is now

in conflict with your actions. It is also very important to not over think or be overly critical of yourself. Conflicts between beliefs and actions are characteristic of being human. Accept this, and attempt to bring your actions into harmony with your beliefs. Don't be critical of yourself if you use thoughts that are defensive to protect yourself from the uncomfortable feelings. Realize that these thoughts can have value if considered appropriately.

Written exercises, where you identify what your core values are, can help you to know what you are all about. When you experience that discomfort that cognitive dissonance creates, it becomes much easier to identify where the conflict is, and make an informed decision about what to do about it. Don't be so hard on yourself, nobody's perfect, life would be pretty boring if you were.

TRUE LIES

We all carry in us personal beliefs, values, ideas, and stories that we tell ourselves. We believe them to be true because they are ours and, therefore, must be true. We wouldn't have these beliefs if they weren't true, would we? Maybe, but much of our internal interpretation is not true, but our perspective. True lies is more than a movie title, or an oxymoron. It is a pretty accurate description of a lot of internal beliefs that we believe to be true.



The reality is that our internal life is our truth, but our reality is not necessarily a literal truth. For example, a rainy morning is interpreted by quite a few people as a "bad day." If you are a farmer,

however, a rainy day is a great thing. So who's story is true? The woman at the bus stop trying to stay dry under the umbrella, or the farmer's crop is getting the first water it's had in days? In both cases the belief is true for the individual. The beliefs of each can also vary depending on situational factors and other events. That woman at the bus stop may be dreading

going to her son's Little League game that evening. Rain cancels the game, so now rain becomes a good thing.

Aaron Beck, one of the pioneers of Cognitive Therapy made a study of some of the beliefs that most people hold and believe to be true. This article will focus on a number of fallacies that many people have that lead to thought disturbances and unhappiness. Beck's belief is that these thought processes effect the way we feel and, as a result, the way we interact with the world.

Some of the more commonly held "true lies" are:

Control Fallacy- Some people believe that they are controlled by factors outside of themselves. They view themselves as helpless victims of fate, unable to influence outcomes and experiences. Things are outside of your control. Others, feel the opposite. They must control everything, and if things go wrong it's "all" their fault. This fallacy of control puts undue responsibility on them for everything that happens.

Fallacy of Fairness-These people carry a resentment when "life isn't fair." Fairness is a huge value to them, and it is something that they live by. They become resentful when the world doesn't show them the same fairness that they give to others. They also are highly indignant and hurt when others disagree with them. Their internal self talk often says, "Life's not fair....It's just not fair." This belief is set up for disappointment, as life doesn't give a damn what you think is fair.

Fallacy of Change-People often expect others to change to suit their demands. They often resort to pressure, demanding, and manipulation. They often have unsatisfying personal relationships because they expect the other person will eventually "come around," or change to suit their requirements.

Fallacy of Being Right-This applies to people who have to be always correct with what they think, do, or say. They will go to extreme lengths to prove to others that they are correct, and others are wrong. They tend towards defensiveness, and can be easily identified as obnoxious know what alls.

Heaven's Reward Fallacy-This applies to those who believe that their hard work has to always pay off. Sacrifice and discipline must pay off. It's almost as if someone is keeping score. They are shocked and dismayed when hard work does not lead to the desired outcome. Working hard to attain a goal is important, but so is working smart and having a clear plan. Those hurt by this fallacy confuse working hard with working smart.

The above beliefs are very common. Many of them are ingrained in us by our upbringing, and have become our “truths.” In some cases they are true, but not in every case. Being able to sort through when these beliefs are true or not is the mark of an insightful, self aware person. It is when we hold these beliefs to be true that we run into trouble. These beliefs, rigidly held, tend to dig us into an emotional hole that becomes difficult to get out of. Becoming aware of what our own, personal, “True Lies” are can avoid a lot of pain and suffering. Begin to examine some of your own deeply held beliefs.

“When you’re in a hole, stop shoveling.”-Unknown

BECOMING THE OBSERVER

Have you ever wondered why it is so much easier giving advice to other people than it is to figure out what you should do yourself? Why are some



of us capable of helping out others with their problems, while our own leave us baffled? Too bad we couldn't figure out some way to give ourselves some of that sound advice that we pass on to others. Good news, there is a way.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is a type of Cognitive

Behavioral Therapy that has the answer to this dilemma. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, also known as ACT, uses a number of techniques and strategies that allow people to give themselves sound self-help. ACT therapy, while best learned from a competent therapist or personal coach, is perhaps the ideal type of self-help. One of the strategies that ACT uses is referred to as Self as Context, or "The Observer." The goal of this strategy is to allow an individual to view their situation from the outside, as if it was happening to someone else. People find that, in doing so, they gain greater objectivity, are less emotionally reactive, and make better decisions. Used frequently a person develops the ability to give

themselves the same kind of sound, solid, advice that they often give to others.

Perhaps the biggest reason that we are able to be so wise and objective when dealing with others is that we are giving advice objectively, with no emotional attachment to the process or the outcome. If you have been following this blog, you have become aware of the role that emotions and faulty logic play in most problems that we have in life. It is our interpretation of the events, feelings, and emotional reactivity that usually cause the discomfort and distress. These emotions and discomforts usually surface through emotional states such as doubt, shame, poor self image, and lack of confidence. When we give advice to someone else our advice is usually sound because we are not privy to those internal events of other people. It is those internal events that get in the way and sabotage life.

The ACT strategy of The Observer can also be used to keep us living within the realm of our own personal moral compass. Most of us have standards of morals for ourselves that we consciously try to adhere to. When we act in ways inconsistent with those values we suffer emotions such as guilt, shame and remorse. Most adults who make these kinds of poor decisions do so without weighing the options fully before acting. Taking the perspective of The Observer is also effective in keeping us in line with the moral standards that we have. Carl Jung, one of the giants in the field of psychotherapy, described the dark side that each of us has as the Shadow Self. He believed that the Shadow Self is the flipside of the ideal that each of us has and the standards that we try to live up to. When we act in ways that allows the Shadow Self to do its thing we feel guilt, shame, and remorse and suffer a subsequent lack of self-esteem. Adopting the role of The Observer allows us to control the Shadow Self, giving it advice and direction, much in the same way that we do for our children when they are young.

There are numerous ACT strategies that allow one to adopt the role of The Observer. I'll mention a few here to get you started. You should also feel free to create your own. The goal here is to observe your situation and your difficulties AS IF THEY WERE HAPPENING TO SOMEONE ELSE. You are not trying to deny your problems by any means, you are trying to get more objectivity so that you can attack the problem using your intellect rather than your emotions.

Some strategies to start with are:

1. Adopt the third person-Describe to yourself what's going on using a name instead of I or me. Don't use any self talk in which you think of yourself in the first person. People find it helpful to use a name and discuss it, either to themselves or to someone else, as if it were happening to someone else. This separates you from the emotions that you would otherwise experience. At some point you may want to ask yourself "What should a person in this situation do?" "What's the best decision for this person to make" is what you are trying to get it. Not what should I do.

2. Create a story-Creating a story about your situation is a powerful way to develop some objectivity and make a more rational choice. If you review lost opportunities of your life, you'll probably find that you would have been successful in many cases where you did not even try. You now realize that you probably could've done a lot of things that you never attempted. You didn't do those things because of a story that you probably told yourself. The "I'm not good enough" story, or the "they wouldn't hire me" story, or the "he/she would never go out with me" story are the typical tales that one tells themselves.

Many successful people do this instinctively. Ted Williams, perhaps the greatest hitter in baseball history, spoke of himself to himself as "Teddy Ballgame." Muhammed Ali, former heavyweight champion, referred to himself as "The Greatest," and eventually talked himself into believing it. I'm not saying you need to be this grandiose, what I am saying is you need to find ways to refer to yourself realistically.

3. The Helicopter View-When dealing with a difficult situation learn to associate a deep breath with viewing the situation from above, as if from a helicopter. I often ask clients to view a difficult situation in this manner. I add the analogy of the situation as a hurricane, and ask them, "What would this look like if you were flying over it? You're in the hurricane right now. If you could fly over this in a helicopter right now, what would it look like? What would be your best options here?"

4. Put the I/E-This is a simple formula that I usually write on a piece of paper or whiteboard to show clients. I explain to them that the best choices are made when we use our Intellect over Emotions. We then discuss their dilemma analyzing their thoughts as products of either the I, intellect, or the E, emotions. Analyzing in this way for a few moments quickly creates far better judgments, as a person quickly labels thoughts as either rational, and part of the intellect or irrational, and part of the

emotional. A very simple tool that you can use instantly with very little setup.

5. Write a story about the problem-This is best used when the problem appears to be huge. Writing the story out, substituting a fictional character for yourself, opens your mind to a world of possibilities. As you get to the decision-making point of your story, stress the best possible outcomes rather than the things you fear. Asking questions like, “What’s the best possible way that this can go?” opens up possibilities and increases the likelihood of better decisions and better outcomes. If you’re dealing with a huge event spending some time working on this story, in writing, can lead to clarity. Discussing the story with a therapist, personal coach, or trusted friend amplifies the benefit of this strategy.

Becoming the Observer is a skill that takes a little time to develop, but when it does it pays huge dividends. It decreases emotional reactivity and pain and leads to more realistic decisions. Begin to implement these strategies for small things and attempt to make it a part of your natural decision-making process. Doing this regularly keeps the skill fresh. When you need this for bigger problems in your life the process we’ll be more natural and spontaneous.

ZEN AND THE ART OF CONTEXT

“The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon.”-Unknown

This simple expression, commonly quoted from Zen philosophy, is a metaphor describing how most of us think. It points out a characteristic of human thought that often gets us into trouble and sometimes leads people to seek psychotherapy. I've been a psychotherapist for 17 years and can't help but notice how frequently misunderstanding the basic meaning of this parable brings people into treatment. The entire parable goes as follows:

“Truth has nothing to do with words. Truth can be likened to the bright moon in the sky. Words, in this case, can be likened to a finger. The finger can point to the moon's location. However, the finger is not the moon. To look at the moon, it is necessary to gaze beyond the finger, right?”

In all branches of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, the basic premise is that the way we think about life events and interpret those events determines the quality of our life experiences. CBT challenges one to adopt a wide lens angle on the events of our lives. Seeing the bigger



picture can lead to introspective reflection and a different interpretation in meaning. A disproportionately large amount of people who enter psychotherapy do so because they are struggling with the meanings that they attach to events which happened in their lives. Life throws thousands of things at us every day. Fortunately, for us, most are pretty simple and we can make sense of them. The beauty of this dynamic is that the longer we live, the more events we process, and the better we get at making sense of what goes on in our world. We learn to attach meaning to these events that are consistent with our values and our world view. Occasionally, something will happen in the lives of everyone that they struggle to interpret.

I often tell my clients that, "The meaning of events is more important than the events themselves." Often, the therapeutic challenge is to allow time to process what has brought them into therapy. A wait and see attitude is often helpful and is illustrated in the following Zen tale:



Once upon a time there was an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically.

"Maybe," the farmer replied.

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbors exclaimed.

"Maybe," replied the old man.

The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune.

"Maybe," answered the farmer.

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was

broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on

how well things had turned out.

“Maybe,” said the farmer.

All of us have to decide what things happening in our world mean to us. Common, every day, events can mean different things to different people. Sometimes, they can even mean different things to us. For example,

something as simple as rain means different things to us at different times. During that July heat wave, that cloudburst is a thing of joy, that cold rain three days in a row in November? Not so much. That first coating of



snow in early December is “beautiful,” those 3 feet in late January “suck.” Why the difference? And, why does that become a story that makes you smile the following Fourth of July? The context in which an event occurs can completely change its meaning. One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter. One man’s war criminal is another man’s national hero. What makes the actions of the person different is interpretation and context.

When life throws surprises at us, it challenges us to make a decision whether we are aware of it or not. Asking yourself the question, “What does this mean to me?,” is a good starting point for more rational decision-making and logical thoughts.

“Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation.”

— Viktor E. Frankl

"WHY ARE YOU BEING SO NEGATIVE?"

"Why are you being so negative?" If you're like most people, I'm sure you've been asked this rhetorical question more than a few times in your life. And, like most people, I'm sure you were stumped by it. Most of us do go through times when we are negative, don't know why, and don't know how to get out of our negativity. Well now there is an answer to that baffling question, and our negativity is normal. Our brain's wired to pay closer attention to negativity, as it serves a protective factor. Problems arise when this negative bias goes haywire.

Negative thinking occurs naturally and frequently. Negativity bias is a psychological phenomenon in which we have greater recall of unpleasant memories compared with positive ones. It is the brain's natural "yeah, but..." mechanism designed to help us avoid danger and harm. With the negative expectations we are more likely to avoid harmful past experiences, making us more mentally prepared for things that could pose threats to our physical safety. This logic probably evolved to help protect us from harm and avoid danger. Our brain's have survival techniques that make it hard for us to not notice potential problems and take steps to avoid them.

Findings in a 2001 study published in the Review of General Psychology entitled "Bad is Stronger than Good," concluded that we not only anticipate negative events, but our imaginations tend to catastrophize the future, and anticipate the worst outcomes. The good news is that this protects us and prepares us for the "what if's" that could result. The bad news is that we become victims of all kinds of stressful events that couldn't possibly happen, reacting emotionally in

anticipation. This negativity bias also prevents us from trying new things and taking on novel challenges. Our negativity bias would have protected us as a species during the caveman days, but it is not usually suited to 21st century life.

The negativity bias gets in the way of modern life most often with relationships. Couples that have good relationships are those that have been able to balance the positive and negative feelings that they have for their partners. Couples stay together for the long haul are those that are able to strike a balance between negativity, arguments, and disagreement, with positivity such as demonstrations of love, affection, and caring. If one or both of a couple are biased towards negativity the relationship is probably not going to last.

Negativity bias also rears its ugly head when it prevents us from taking an opportunity that might enhance our finances or careers. If you've been slogging away at an unfulfilling job for years, you probably have thought of changing jobs at one point or another. You probably came up with some idea of a disaster that would occur if you were to attempt a new career. You probably stayed in the unfulfilling job and rationalized with a "devil you know is better than the devil you don't" attitude. Don't feel bad, you're not alone, we all do it.

Like most hardwired behaviors, negativity bias can malfunction. We sometimes are negative and don't know why. Negativity can happen for no logical reason at times. Sometimes "Why are you so negative?" can only be truthfully

answered with "I don't know." There are some ways we can cope with this random negativity. Some steps to take are:

1. Recognize the negativity for what it is, a random attack of negativity bias. Don't make more of it than you have to. If you can't identify a cause for the negative emotion move on. If you look for one, your brain will definitely find one.
2. Change your focus. What am I thinking and saying to myself right now? How does my thinking impact what I am feeling? You can change your



focus by asking yourself questions designed to create curiosity, allowing you to take a big step back and see the bigger picture.

3. Change your physiological state. Move, exercise. go for a brisk walk, breathe! Do something to get out of your head and into your body.

4. Choose your thoughts by thinking of something positive that you are grateful for, looking forward to, or happy about. While this is simple advice, it can work wonders.

5. Lighten up! Don't be so hard on yourself or attempt to over think the situation. If the answer to the question, "why are you so negative?" is "I don't know," then move on, get over it. If you keep looking for something negative you find it. When you're in a hole, stop shoveling!

Hopefully you found some sound advice of how to cope with this age old question. All that's required to get out of a random, negative funk is self-awareness and a few go to strategies that can change your mood. No biggie, it's just part of being human.

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ABOUT

Hello, my name is John Sannicandro, and I've been in education, counseling, and coaching for over 30 years. I've been a practicing therapist for the past 15 years. This website was created as a result of my experience in the practice of psychotherapy and counseling. My first career was in education and coaching, and like many who have created second careers, it has been hard to separate the two. Traditional psychotherapy has been too stagnant, lifeless, and slow to suit my style.

Over time I have learned to combine therapies that are more action orientated as therapeutic interventions. Behavioral Therapy, Cognitive Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Mindfulness Techniques, Hypnosis, and Bodywork, are some of the strategies that I utilize with clients to make lasting, meaningful change.

JOHN SANNICANDRO, LMHC, CMBF



I am a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, a Certified Personal Coach, a Certified Mind Body Coach, and a Certified Hypnotherapist. I offer online counseling, coaching, and consultations through email or Skype as an alternative to traditional settings.

Please contact me if you are interested in improving the quality of your life.

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