

## 2. Metacognition

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a strategy based on a simple, yet profound, premise - thought produces emotions and behaviors. The root cause of most mental and behavioral problems is **thought**. CBT posits that in order to remedy anything from stress and depression to addiction and weight problems the underlying thought processes need to be changed. Getting at these thought processes and making changes to them, though, is an involved and difficult process. It can take a considerable amount of focus, attention, discipline and repetition to get the job done. In addition to tenacious effort one also has to be familiar with a process that takes a bit to get the hang of. The process involves skills and methods that must be learned and practiced on a daily basis. The purpose of this handbook is to outline those steps from start to finish.

We begin with the central premise that all emotion and behavior is driven by thought. Many folks don't want to believe this to be true, especially those folks in the pharmaceutical industry. They would like for people to believe that emotion is driven by brain chemistry and that emotion can thus be changed with drugs. No doubt that drugs can alter mood, but drugs don't directly alter the thought process. Thus they don't correct the problem but only serve to mask or ease the symptoms. Underlying thought processes remain firmly intact and continue to cause problems.

The first step in the process is to identify the thoughts that are causing the problems. This is a tricky part of the process. Most folks are not used to attempting to identify specific thoughts. We are actually quite unaware of most of the thoughts that run through our heads on a daily basis. It has been estimated that the average person thinks about 50,000 thoughts per day. Not sure who did the counting but I agree it is thousands. Of these, the average person is aware of a mere 10%. In order to change thoughts we have to be very good at identifying what is already happening. This takes a bit of practice. The process is formally known as Meta-cognition which literally means "thinking about thinking".

We must get good at paying attention to all of the thoughts we are thinking but it is especially important at first to think about the thoughts that are of the negative variety.

Negative thoughts are defined as those thoughts that keep change from occurring. Negative thoughts keep us from feeling the way we want to feel or keep us from getting where we want to go. Positive thoughts, by way of contrast, are those thoughts that create positive emotion or move us in the direction we want to go. The negative vs. positive dichotomy is not a good vs. bad one. A good way to keep this distinction in mind is to think of how we speak of the results of a pregnancy test. A negative result means 'no change'. A positive result means 'we have a change'. Like a pregnancy test whether or not a positive result is 'good' depends on perspective.

For example let's suppose that I want to begin an exercise program. I decide that tomorrow I am going to stop at the gym on my way home from work. But when the time comes for me to leave work I think that I have to get that 'last one thing done' before tomorrow. Thus I decide I don't have time to work out today. The thought itself is not negative - thinking I need to get that last one thing done and making it a priority over working out - yet by definition it is a thought that keeps me stuck in my habit of not working out. By contrast a thought such as - 'I am going to work out, I don't care if I get that last thing done' - is a positive thought because it moves one in the direction

of becoming an exerciser. However, one might argue it is a negative thought because it makes me less productive or less reliable at work. So keeping the definition clear is vital to the process.

The process of hunting down and capturing negative thoughts begins with identifying unwanted emotions or behaviors. In the previous example the unwanted behavior is skipping the workout. Backing up from the unwanted behavior we can spot the errant thought process. In this case identifying the thought(s) that ultimately reached the conclusion that finishing something at work took precedence over working out. Often times the indicator is a negative emotion. Say for example it is Sunday evening, I glance at my calendar for Monday and notice that I have a 12hour day scheduled and I get that little 'icky' feeling in the pit of my stomach, that 'little cloud of dread'. If I listen carefully I might 'hear' some thoughts such as: 'It is going to be such a long day. I am going to be so tired.' Again, one might not define these as particularly negative thoughts, but they really are as they produce the unwanted emotion of dread. If you are like most people you will begin to notice that you have many of these thoughts that lead to undesirable emotions and behaviors from skipping workouts & overeating to feeling dread, stressed or depressed. Lurking behind every unwanted emotion and behavior is a thought driving such. Usually the thought is not in isolation but a member of a set of thoughts or 'thought process' that we use over and over again to arrive at the unwanted behavior or emotion.

The trick to the first task is to work hard at developing an awareness of these thought processes. As soon as you become aware of an unwanted emotion or behavior you have to force yourself to stop, mid-thought, and capture the thought. Write down this thought right then and there if you can. If you prefer you can text or type the thought. Texting has actually become my favorite way of capturing my own unwanted thoughts. I always have my phone on my hip so it is quite handy to reach for my phone and text the thought. The key is to capture as many of these errant thoughts as humanly possible. What we are looking for initially is the quantity, frequency, duration and intensity of these thoughts. What will emerge in this first exercise is a pattern of thought(s) that represent the 'usual' ways in which we keep ourselves stuck in unwanted emotional and behavioral states.

Most folks have no idea how many thoughts are running through their heads on a daily basis. One of the most common acknowledgements I get from my clients is how surprised they are at how often they are thinking certain thoughts about themselves, especially those that are of the negative variety. It is quite enlightening to most. Developing this awareness is critical to the process. We have to become very good at 'listening in' on our own internal dialogue. These existing thought processes provide the raw materials for building the preferred thought process. We call the existing thought processes the 'default' thought processes and they are the ones that are causing the problems.

In summary the first step in the process is to practice identifying errant, default thought processes that are creating negative emotions and behaviors. It is imperative that we become very good at capturing these negative thoughts in writing. This means literally writing/texting/typing every thought we become aware of. While this may seem cumbersome at first, it is vital to becoming very familiar with the kind of thoughts that are causing the problems. Keep a notepad (or your phone) handy and pause to jot/text these thoughts as they are occurring. If you are driving, become familiar with the voice memo feature on your phone. I seem to capture many errant

thoughts when I am driving. These thoughts are then compiled in a document that becomes the reservoir or collection of thoughts that will be used as the building blocks for cognitive restructuring - the next step of the process.