

Cognitive behavioural approaches in the workplace

Gladeana McMahon presents a guide through the principles

Around the 1960s, US psychiatrist Aaron Beck observed that his patients engaged in 'internal dialogue' and he recognised that there was a connection between thoughts and feelings, creating the term 'automatic thoughts' to describe these thoughts. If a person felt distressed in some way, their thoughts were usually negative and by helping individuals identify these thoughts, they were able to overcome them. And so cognitive therapy (CT) was born. In the 1970s cognitive therapy became cognitive behaviour therapy by including much that had been learned from behaviour modification. Since its inception it has become one of the most widely researched and recommended therapies. It is through the process of identifying and re-evaluating self-defeating thinking that an individual is persuaded to engage in more effective ways of thinking and behaving. CBT strategies and techniques form the basis of what has now become known as cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC).

The role of questions

CBT and CBC are non-directive forms of counselling and coaching and through a collaborative process, termed 'guided discovery', individuals devise their own conclusions and solutions. Guided discovery is based on Socratic questioning whereby the counsellor or coach asks the person a series of questions that enable the individual to become aware of his or her thinking. The term derives from the method of philosophical inquiry developed by the Greek philosopher Socrates. The practice involves asking a series of questions surrounding a central issue to identify ideas on the subject being explored. Questions such as, 'What do you mean by your difficulties with...?', 'In what ways does this affect you?' or 'How do other people react to you?' are aimed at helping the individual uncover his or her own thinking. Socratic questioning promotes awareness, allowing a more realistic and rational decision-making process to take place as this type of questioning moves an individual on from a self-

limiting style of thinking to a more adaptable system of identifying a number of problem-solving strategies.

How do CBT and CBC work?

CBT and CBC are time limited, solution focused and based in the present. Past experiences are only elicited in order to gain information that highlights why and how past events have led to the individual's current way of thinking and behaving. CBT and CBC aim to help individuals achieve goals and devise action plans to improve psychological issues or performance and do so by taking into account the need for self-awareness of moods and emotions. In this sense, they help people become more emotionally intelligent, working on the principle that understanding one's own emotions, motivations and ways of being, as well as those of others, increases effectiveness in all that one does.

Developing awareness

CBT and CBC are 'psycho-educative' in nature, which means that the goal is to help the individual develop the necessary skills so that the individual is able to become their own therapist or coach in the future. As the client becomes aware of his or her own thinking style, its strengths and limitations, new ways of thinking and alternative ways of behaving, the individual becomes more adaptable. By using this newly acquired knowledge, the individual develops more effective and satisfying ways of dealing with challenges.

The number and timing of sessions depends on the individual's circumstances. In CBT a client may be seen for anything between six and 20 sessions usually but not necessarily weekly. In CBC a coaching programme of six 90-minute sessions could be delivered as one session a week or fortnight for three sessions and then one session a month or every six weeks for the remaining three. Alternatively, it may be more helpful to engage in one three-hour session in order to gain maximum effect, following this session with shorter sessions.

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Applying cognitive behavioural approaches to individuals in an organisation

At the start of the coaching process a behavioural contract^{1,2} is drawn up. In CBT this translates into a 'problem list' or 'agenda'. If working in a corporate environment this stage needs to take account of the changes required from a corporate perspective, the needs of the client and the changes that he or she wishes to make and the thoughts of the practitioner who synthesises this information into a series of 'objectives' and associated 'outcomes'. For example, with CBT the organisation may recognise the individual is severely stressed and want to assist the individual return to their normal state so the work is more therapeutic in nature. In CBC, the organisation may wish to see an individual improve 'their communication skills' and the individual may want to 'communicate better when dealing with direct reports'. Both of these statements are regarded as overall objectives. However, neither of these objectives specifies what would need to be different in order for there to be a positive outcome or some sort of measurable change, or how the organisation or individual will measure these change(s). A series of further questions are used to elicit measurable outcomes such as: 'If you could communicate more effectively with staff, what would you be doing differently?'

Consideration is also given to the key performance indicators already in use within the organisation and how these can be used to measure change.

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The role of the coach is to ensure that the outcomes are clearly stated, that all parties are on board in relation to what is expected and that the number of desired outcomes can be obtained in the specified allotted time. Agreement about the type and method of feedback, the parameters of confidentiality and the terms and conditions related to the coaching assignment are also made transparent. Once all these factors have been agreed, the contract can be signed off by all parties and used to evaluate the success of the coaching sessions at the end of the programme. There are times when the contract may need to be amended during the coaching programme if new information comes to light or if individual circumstances change.

Sessions in both CBT and CBC start with the practitioner checking the client's mood as well as what has happened since the previous meeting. The practitioner then refers to the 'problem list' (CBT) or behavioural contract (CBC) to enable the

Case study: cognitive behavioural coaching for communication

John, a senior director in a city financial services group, was referred for coaching by his line manager. Although he was seen as being technically able, he came across as cold and disinterested, and this had a negative impact on the people he met. One of the objectives of his coaching was to help John develop better interpersonal skills in order to make him a more effective manager. A coaching contract of six, one-and-a-half hour coaching sessions was agreed. His behavioural contract included the following outcome: 'To identify and develop relevant communication skills associated with effective relationship building'.

During his early sessions with his coach, John came to recognise that to

progress further in the organisation, he needed to develop his people management skills. Psychometric profiling helped identify his personality type and John realised that his approach tended to alienate people. By considering the impact he had on others, he was able to develop an awareness of his 'natural' style of communicating and recognise that different people had their own communication preferences.

The main hurdle John had to overcome was to appreciate that the origination of business was only partly to do with technical ability. The focus of his coaching sessions became the development of desired behaviours to improve personal relationships. A series of behavioural

exercises was created in relation to creating and maintaining effective relationships. To assist this process, John was helped to identify his thinking style. Two of his beliefs were 'people are here to focus on the task' and 'if I want to succeed then I have to get results at all costs'.

By the end of the coaching contract John had modified his behaviour and communication style to one that placed more emphasis on building individual relationships. The feedback received from his manager and from his team demonstrated a positive change in the way John related to people. In addition, John found that his more open personal style was securing a more positive pay-off in terms of securing business.

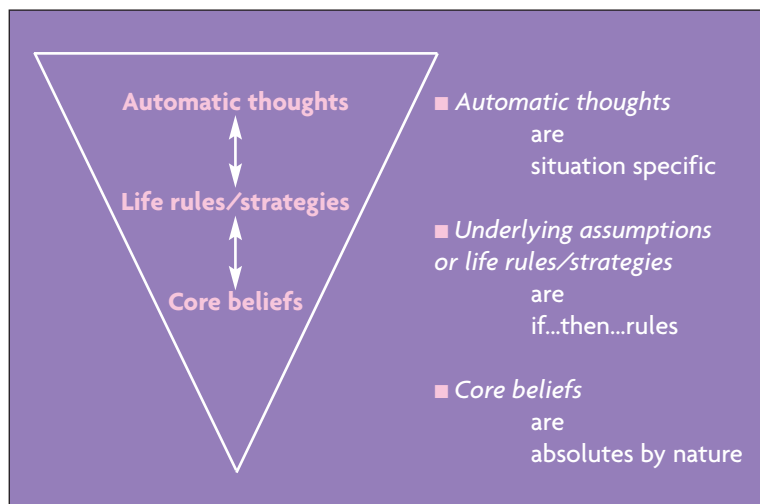


Figure 1: A cognitive model

client to choose one of the items listed to work on. The session then focuses on the chosen item using whatever skills and/or techniques seem appropriate, and the client is assisted to design his or her own homework assignment to take place before the next session. Finally, the session ends with the coach asking for specific feedback on how the client has experienced the session and what has been helpful. CBT and CBC are collaborative processes so it is important that the client takes control of his/her subject matter, and provides feedback to the practitioner on his or her approach.

The individual is helped to identify and understand the impact of his or her thinking style³. Negative Automatic Thoughts or NATs (those thoughts that are self-defeating) are based on the 'life rules' or 'underlying assumptions' we have formed to function in our environment and, these in turn, are based on the core beliefs we hold about ourselves, others and the world in general.

Once the relationship between core belief(s), underlying assumption(s) and the way thoughts are triggered in such situations are uncovered, an individual is able to stand back and see how such thoughts are unhelpful (figure 1).

CBT and CBC place emphasis on the identification of self-defeating thinking and thoughts are identified by using tools such as a 'Thoughts record form' where the individual is taught how to identify his or her thinking style (figure 2).

In addition, the individual is also asked to begin to identify the types of cognitive distortions he or she engages in that colour the individual's perception of situations⁴ (figure 3).

Once the person is aware of his or her ways of distorting reality the individual has the opportunity of putting in countermeasures.

In CBT/CBC three types of challenges are used to help the client re-evaluate their thinking⁵:

1 Evidence based

Where is the evidence that you can never learn to communicate more effectively?

Problem situation A	Self-defeating thinking B	Emotional and behavioural reactions C	Alternative response D	New approach to problem E
Giving a public lecture	<p>I must perform well or the outcome will be awful.</p> <p>Logical: <i>Just because I want to perform well, how does it logically follow that I must perform well?</i></p> <p>Empirical: <i>Where is the evidence that my demand must be granted? Am I being realistic? If I don't perform well, will the outcome be really awful?</i></p> <p>Pragmatic: <i>Where is it getting me holding on to this belief?</i></p>	Anxious, inability to concentrate	<p>Logical: <i>Although it is strongly preferable to do well, I don't have to.</i></p> <p>Empirical: <i>There is no evidence that I will get what I demand even if it is preferable and desirable.</i></p> <p>Pragmatic: <i>If I don't perform well, the outcome may be bad, but hardly devastating! If I continue holding on to this belief, I will remain anxious and be even more likely to perform badly.</i></p>	If I change my attitude I will feel concerned and <i>not</i> anxious. Also I'll be able to concentrate and prepare for the lecture.

Figure 2: Thoughts form

Discounting the positive*If I can do it, it doesn't count***All or nothing thinking***I pass or I fail, you win or you lose, it's right or it's wrong, I do it all now or do none at all***Labelling***I did something bad therefore I am bad, I said something silly therefore I am foolish***Mind reading***She didn't look at me therefore I have done something wrong***Fortune telling***I just know it will be awful***Magnification***Oh my God this is SO terrible***Emotional reasoning***The reason I did not understand was because I am stupid, I said something wrong because I am bad***Personalisation***It's all my fault, I am the one to blame***Blame***It's all his/her/my fault***Generalisation***All men/women are the same, I never get what I want, it's always the same***Shoulds, musts, have to's and oughts***I/you/she/he/they must have to ought to*

Figure 3: Types of cognitive distortions

2 Logical

Just because you have experienced difficulties communicating how does it logically follow that you always will?

3 Pragmatic

Even if it were true that you are never going to be the best communicator, do you feel better or worse for thinking you can't?

The above aims to help the individual engage in realistic thinking that is more likely to help reach sensible, informed and sustainable decisions.

A CBT/CBC practitioner recognises that the demands we make of ourselves, others and the world are likely to generate either positive or negative outcomes⁶. For example, if I demand of myself that *I must do well, if I do not then it is awful* or *I must be approved of by others, if I am not then I am of less worth*, then these thoughts are likely to result in stress, anxiety, depression, shame and guilt.

Demands of others such as *You have to treat me justly, if you do not then it is not fair and you deserve to be punished*, are likely to result in anger and passive-aggressive behaviour.

For those who believe that *Life must be just as I want it to be and if it is not then that's awful*, the outcomes are likely to be self-pity, addictive behaviour, depression and a tendency to procrastinate.

CBT and CBC are both approaches that are used in organisations. CBT is used to address psychological difficulties and more traditional therapeutic issues, whereas CBC is used to enhance performance or as a performance-recovery intervention. ■

References

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