The Cognitive Behavioural Model and how you can use it in your own life.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT – which has many variants) is a widely used evidence-based model of therapy that is helpful in addressing a range of psychological disorders.

The underlying model of CBT is relatively simple to understand, and although understanding the model is not the same as getting CBT from a trained psychologist, it can still be a useful tool to use in your own life.

In this post I am going to explain how.

**CBT – the basics**

Imagine breaking up your everyday experiences into 5 categories:

**Events/situations** – These are the things that happen to you, or that you are involved in. It includes events, the behaviour of other people, the material world.

**Feelings/emotions** – These are your subjective experiences of your mood or how you are feeling in any given moment (e.g. happy, sad, surprised, disgusted, angry, fearful).

**Physical sensations** – These are the sensations you experience as arising from in your body. It might be muscle tension, or pain, or light-headedness or stomach churning or something similar.

**Beliefs, evaluations and thoughts** – These are the contents of your thinking mind. Thoughts are the most readily accessible. They are the constant chatter in your head, that might take the form of words (e.g. like a commentary) but can also include images and memories.

Underneath these thoughts lie the constant stream of evaluations that you mind is making about the situation you are in, the people you are with, how you are feeling, etc. These are not as easily accessible to the conscious mind, because your brain is constantly assessing an enormous amount of information, and as such it wouldn’t be feasible for you to be consciously aware of all of it.

Underneath these evaluations, lie your beliefs. Your beliefs are your roadmap or blueprint to understanding yourself, the world, other people, the past and the future. They are how you construct the world symbolically, and are the result of your past experiences, biology, culture, society, and learning. Like evaluations, your beliefs are not always consciously available to you, but can often be elicited through questions or observing your behaviour.

**Behaviours** – These are the actions we engage in to interact with the world, both the physical world outside our skin, but also the internal world inside our skin. It includes physical behaviours (e.g. picking up a drink, walking over to talk to a person), which are observable to others, as well as our mental behaviours (e.g. writing a mental list, ruminating on a recent event) which are typically not observable to others. Our behaviours are typically the component of experience that feels most within our control, although not always the case (for example, addictive behaviours can feel very much outside of our control).

CBT holds that these are all related in a logical way. CBT specifically posits that if we understand a person’s thoughts evaluations and beliefs, then the links between the situation that a person finds themselves in, and their feelings, physical sensations and behaviours will all make sense.

*Let’s consider a basic example:*

Michael and Jess both arrive at a party. The door swings open and they both see a big crowd in the back, and hear some loud music playing.

Jess hears the music, likes the song that is playing, and thinks to herself “this is going to be a good night”. She feels energised and walks confidently through to the crowd to find her friends and a great night begins.

Michael sees the crowd and thinks to himself “ahh shit, I hate big crowds”. He gets a sinking feeling in his stomach and feels despondent. He edges in through the door but makes an immediate beeline to a less crowded part of the room where it is quieter and he can collect his thoughts.

From an outsider’s perspective, both Michael and Jess found themselves in the same situation, but reacted quite differently. Their reactions however make sense when we understand how each of them evaluated the situation and the thoughts that popped up in their head as a result.

If we questioned both of them further, we’d probably be able to unearth some beliefs they hold that make sense of their evaluations. For example Michael might believe that “I am not particularly good in big crowds. I get overwhelmed and don’t really know what to say”. This would help explain his reaction.

Jess on the other hand might believe “I love big crowds, the energy they create is addictive”. This makes sense of her reaction.

***So CBT, in essence, helps people make sense of their feelings, physical sensations, and behaviour through an understanding of their beliefs, evaluations and thoughts.***

CBT assumes that not all these beliefs, evaluations and thoughts are easily accessible to our conscious mind. Hence why CBT is delivered typically as a therapy, with ongoing practice, homework exercises and interactions with a therapist. These allow people time and practice to learn to identify some of the thoughts, evaluations and beliefs that are not immediately available to our conscious minds.

That doesn’t mean however that you can’t benefit from learning the CBT model and doing some simple exercises in your own life. Let us take a look at one of those exercises.

**Using CBT idea in your own life.**

OK, for this exercise you will need to first make peace with the idea that your evaluations and beliefs are **not always rational.**

This can be a little hard at times because we all like to think that we are seeing the world, ourselves, other people and the future in an accurate way, but I’m afraid that is not the case.

In fact, humans demonstrate a large range of different cognitive biases (errors in thinking). It’s amazing we even manage to get our shoes on in the morning.

To sink this idea into your head, memorise this face.

This is Albert Ellis, the father of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). He loved letting people know that some of their underlying beliefs about themselves, the world and others were irrational.

All you need to do for this exercise is print out the following document and keep it close to you (you could also keep the file on your laptop or mobile device and complete it electronically).

This document lists a range of common thinking errors or ‘cognitive distortions’ that people make.

Your task is to simply notice which, if any, of these thinking errors you make during periods of high emotion. If you catch yourself doing one of them, mark it on the sheet with a tick or a cross.

Over time, you’ll learn which of these you use most often, and then during times of high distress, you can ask yourself “Am I engaging in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ at the moment”?

There is no need to share these observations with anyone, so be as honest as you can with yourself.

You may find this process difficult at first, because we aren’t used to analysing our thinking in this way. We are so caught up in the thoughts themselves, that we don’t think about the thoughts. As with anything, practice makes perfect. Albert has confidence in you :)

**Where to from here**

In future posts we’ll explore other CBT-based strategies for getting to know your beliefs, evaluations and thoughts better. In the meantime, feel free to research CBT online. If you would like to start using CBT to cope with difficult emotions, consider signing up to <https://moodgym.com.au/> It is free to use for all Australians.

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**Common Thinking Errors/ Cognitive Distortions**

Taken from - [**https://psychcentral.com/lib/15-common-cognitive-distortions/**](https://psychcentral.com/lib/15-common-cognitive-distortions/)

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| **Error Description** | **Oh yeah I totally do this one ✓** |
| **1. Filtering.** We take the negative details and magnify them while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail and dwell on it exclusively so that their vision of reality becomes darkened or distorted. |  |
| **2. Polarized Thinking (or “Black and White” Thinking).**  In polarized thinking, things are either “black-or-white.” We have to be perfect or we’re a failure — there is no middle ground. You place people or situations in “either/or” categories, with no shades of grey or allowing for the complexity of most people and situations. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure. |  |
| **3. Overgeneralization.** In this cognitive distortion, we come to a general conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens only once, we expect it to happen over and over again. A person may see a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat. |  |
| **4. Jumping to Conclusions.** Without individuals saying so, we know what they are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, we are able to determine how people are feeling toward us.  For example, a person may conclude that someone is reacting negatively toward them but doesn’t actually bother to find out if they are correct. Another example is a person may anticipate that things will turn out badly, and will feel convinced that their prediction is already an established fact. |  |
| **5. Catastrophizing.** We expect disaster to strike, no matter what. This is also referred to as “magnifying or minimizing.” We hear about a problem and use *what if* questions (e.g., “What if tragedy strikes?” “What if it happens to me?”).  For example, a person might exaggerate the importance of insignificant events (such as their mistake, or someone else’s achievement). Or they may inappropriately shrink the magnitude of significant events until they appear tiny (for example, a person’s own desirable qualities or someone else’s imperfections). |  |
| **6. Personalization.** Personalization is a distortion where a person believes that everything others do or say is some kind of direct, personal reaction to the person. We also compare ourselves to others trying to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc.  A person engaging in personalization may also see themselves as the cause of some unhealthy external event that they were not responsible for. For example, “We were late to the dinner party and *caused* the hostess to overcook the meal. If I had only pushed my husband to leave on time, this wouldn’t have happened.” |  |
| **7. Control Fallacies.** If we feel *externally controlled*, we see ourselves as helpless a victim of fate. For example, “I can’t help it if the quality of the work is poor, my boss demanded I work overtime on it.” The fallacy of *internal control* has us assuming responsibility for the pain and happiness of everyone around us. For example, “Why aren’t you happy? Is it because of something I did?” |  |
| **Error Description** | **Oh yeah I totally do this one** |
| **8. Fallacy of Fairness.** We feel resentful because we think we know what is fair, but other people won’t agree with us. As our parents tell us when we’re growing up and something doesn’t go our way, “Life isn’t always fair.” People who go through life applying a measuring ruler against every situation judging its “fairness” will often feel badly and negative because of it. Because life isn’t “fair” — things will not always work out in your favour, even when you think they should. |  |
| **9. Blaming.** We hold other people responsible for our pain, or take the other track and blame ourselves for every problem. For example, “Stop making me feel bad about myself!” Nobody can “make” us feel any particular way — only we have control over our own emotions and emotional reactions. |  |
| **10. Shoulds.** We have a list of ironclad rules about how others and we should behave. People who break the rules make us angry, and we feel guilty when we violate these rules. A person may often believe they are trying to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn’ts, as if they have to be punished before they can do anything.  For example, “I really should exercise. I shouldn’t be so lazy.” *Musts* and *oughts* are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When a person directs *should statements* toward others, they often feel anger, frustration and resentment. |  |
| **11. Emotional Reasoning.** We believe that what we feel must be true automatically. If we feel stupid and boring, then we must be stupid and boring. You assume that your unhealthy emotions reflect the way things really are — “I feel it, therefore it must be true.” |  |
| **12. Fallacy of Change.** We expect that other people will change to suit us if we just pressure or cajole them enough. We need to change people because our hopes for happiness seem to depend entirely on them. |  |
| **13. Global Labelling.**  We generalize one or two qualities into a negative global judgment. These are extreme forms of generalizing, and are also referred to as “labelling” and “mislabelling.” Instead of describing an error in context of a specific situation, a person will attach an unhealthy label to themselves.  For example, they may say, “I’m a loser” in a situation where they failed at a specific task. When someone else’s behaviour rubs a person the wrong way, they may attach an unhealthy label to him, such as “He’s a real jerk.” Mislabelling involves describing an event with language that is highly coloured and emotionally loaded. For example, instead of saying someone drops her children off at day-care every day, a person who is mislabelling might say that “she abandons her children to strangers.” |  |
| **14. Always Being Right.** We are continually on trial to prove that our opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and we will go to any length to demonstrate our rightness. For example, “I don’t care how badly arguing with me makes you feel, I’m going to win this argument no matter what because I’m right.” Being right often is more important than the feelings of others around a person who engages in this cognitive distortion, even loved ones. |  |
| **15. Heaven’s Reward Fallacy.** We expect our sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if someone is keeping score. We feel bitter when the reward doesn’t come. |  |

Not satisfied that this is the complete list of cognitive errors/biases? – Well, you’d be right - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases>