

CBT

Challenging the Thought Distortions & Negative Core
Beliefs of Addiction

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One Step Rehab

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module you should

- I. Have understood the cognitive, behavioral therapy model and learnt what ACBDE stands for.
- II. Gained awareness of unmanageable feeling states especially those which are symptomatic of addiction
- III. Identified your irrational core beliefs and thought distortions which underpin and maintain your unmanageable feeling states
- IV. Learnt to dispute irrational thought processes with a range of techniques
- V. Learnt to use paradoxical behaviors to re-balance yourself when your thoughts and feelings are disturbed

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1. What is CBT?

In order to function better in our recovery we need to begin learning healthy ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. One of the best ways to do this is found in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (commonly known as CBT).

CBT was developed in the latter half of the twentieth century after psychologists and psychotherapists began to slowly move away from the work of Sigmund Freud who was arguably the founder of 'talk-therapy'. Freud's method of treating psychological problems was based on the idea that we have 'unconscious desires' to express sexuality and aggression which are often deemed unacceptable by society, and which then leads to repression of those desires and a build-up of psychological ill-health.

Beginning in the 1960's therapists began to realize that these 'repressed thoughts' were not as unconscious as Freud believed they were, and that they could be pointed out and discussed with clients and more healthy ways of thinking could then be developed. Two men at the forefront of this revolution were the psychiatrist *Aaron Beck* and the psychologist *Albert Ellis*.

Aaron Beck developed **Cognitive Therapy** and Albert Ellis developed **REBT** (Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy). These became the two well-springs which influenced the growth of CBT. Both approaches were 'action-oriented' which means that they were much more directive than previous therapies and centered firmly on finding solutions to problems. Central to this was the idea that **errors in thinking** cause **disturbed feelings** which then lead to **self-defeating behaviors**. Therefore, if we change the way we think (by challenging our thinking errors consciously) then our feelings will change and we will behave differently in light of these new beliefs.

Both men acknowledged the influence of stoic philosophy on their methods. Stoic philosophy was a branch of ancient Greek philosophy. The most well-

known stoic philosophers were *Epictetus* (who was a slave) and *Marcus Aurelius* (who was an Emperor). Both men believed that philosophy (problem solving) should be based on reason and logic, and further, that more than just being a way of thinking, philosophy should also be a 'way of living'. To an extent, the stoic movement was an extension of the *Socratic tradition* (stemming from the earlier Greek philosopher Socrates) who is famous for having said:

"The unexamined life is not worth living". (Socrates)

Like Socrates, both the stoics and the early founders of CBT believed that we should be prepared to put the way we think and act under the microscope and learn where we are going wrong. We should examine ourselves and ask ourselves questions. Further, they noted that life is often beyond our control. Consequently it makes little sense to disturb ourselves unnecessarily about things we can't change. Instead, we should assume total ownership of the things that we *can* change. This mindset fits exactly with a 12 Step view of the world, and is reflected in the serenity prayer, a prayer which is used in most 12 step meetings. The serenity prayer suggests that we "*accept the things we cannot change*" and try to "*change the things we can*".

As well as Stoic philosophy and 12 step fellowships, CBT also has strong parallels with Buddhist thought. Consider the following quotes attributed to Epictetus and the Buddha respectively:

"It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters" (Epictetus)

"We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world." (Buddha)

2. Adversities, Beliefs & Consequences (ABC)

One of the more well-known tools used in CBT is called ABC. It was primarily developed by Albert Ellis. ABC stands for *activators, beliefs and consequences*.

- A. **Activator:** This is the person, place or thing that triggers us and 'causes' our disturbed feelings.
- B. **Beliefs:** These are all the things we think and say to ourselves about those activators (even if it's unconscious and irrational).
- C. **Consequences:** These are our disturbed feelings. Usually we think it is the activator (A) that causes our feelings, but when we look closer we can see that it's our Beliefs (B) that cause us to feel disturbed.

In CBT it is commonly assumed that it is not the things which happen to us (A's) which make us have unhealthy feelings, but rather, what we believe about what is happening to us (B's). The ABC method shows us that it is essentially our thinking which create our feelings (or at least the intensity of our feelings).

Fig 1. Activators, beliefs & consequences in addiction



Most people never get this far in their analysis of their own thinking. Most people assume that certain stressful activators will inevitably create certain negative feelings. Effectively, we assume that $A = C$.

Example 1

A (Activator) – Someone stands on a man's foot

= **C** (Consequence) - He feels angry and jumps up and yells at them

But the problem with this analysis is that different people have different reactions to the same stressful activators. Let's take a look at the same thing happening to another person.

Example 2

A (Activator) – Someone stands on another man's foot

= **C** (Consequence) - He feels calm, smiles and apologizes for being in their way

These men have the same A's (activators) but different C's (consequences). This is because they have different B's (beliefs) about what is happening to them. The first man probably has ingrained core beliefs about the world being a difficult place, where it is common to be hurt, picked on and pushed around. Therefore he has feelings which are volatile and defensive. While this is understandable (and perhaps unavoidable if he has had a difficult life) it is not necessarily good for his health and it is important to recognize that it can be changed.

The second man probably has beliefs about the world being a safe place most of the time, and other people being generally helpful and trustworthy. Or ... he thinks that it is to be expected that people stand on your foot sometimes. Therefore, he has feelings which are more manageable and less disturbed. Whether this gentleman is right or wrong in his assessment about the world is a subjective matter. What we can say, is that he almost certainly has better mental and emotional health because he is less stressed.

Albert Ellis summed this up with the following simple equation:

A does not = C

A + B = C

So let's run those examples again putting the B's in the equation.

Example 1

A (Someone stands on the first guys foot)

+ B (His belief that they did it deliberately and that people are often clumsy and inconsiderate)

= C (He feels angry and jumps up and yells at them)

Example 2

A (Someone stands on the second guys foot)

+ B (His belief that this is inevitable on a crowded bus)

= C (He feels calm, smiles and apologizes for being in the persons way).

Exercise 1

Make a list of people, places and things that tend to activate you using the table on the next page. Then use the feelings checklist on the following page to describe how that particular trigger tends to make you feel.

Feelings Checklist

| ANGRY/ HURT | DEPRESSED/ SAD | CONFUSED/ STUCK | HELPLESS/ VULNERABLE | SCARED/ AFRAID | INDIFFERENT / NUMB |
|----------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| irritated | disappointed | upset | incapable | fearful | dull |
| enraged | discouraged | doubtful | alone | terrified | nonchalant |
| hostile | ashamed | uncertain | paralyzed | suspicious | neutral |
| sore | powerless | indecisive | fatigued | anxious | reserved |
| annoyed | guilty | perplexed | useless | alarmed | weary |
| upset | dissatisfied | embarrassed | inferior | nervous | bored |
| hateful | miserable | hesitant | vulnerable | scared | preoccupied |
| fuming | terrible | stupefied | empty | worried | cold |
| indignant | in despair | disillusioned | hesitant | frightened | disinterested |
| bitter | sulky | unbelieving | despair | restless | lifeless |
| aggressive | tearful | skeptical | frustrated | doubtful | insensitive |
| resentful | sorrowful | distrustful | distressed | | |
| provoked | pained | lost | pathetic | | |
| incensed | grief | unsure | dominated | | |
| infuriated | anguish | uneasy | | | |
| crushed | desolate | | | | |
| tormented | desperate | | | | |
| deprived | pessimistic | | | | |
| dejected | unhappy | | | | |
| rejected | lonely | | | | |
| offended | | | | | |
| victimized | | | | | |
| heartbroken | | | | | |
| humiliated | | | | | |

3. Core Beliefs

All of us have an internal dialogue which goes on inside our heads. With most of us this is a mixture of good and bad, rational and irrational. Aaron Beck referred to these thoughts as **negative automatic thoughts** (NATS) and Albert Ellis called them **negative self-talk**.

NATS, or negative self-talk, are generally the manifestation of a larger **core belief**. Core beliefs inform the way we view the world, others and ourselves.

Throughout childhood we form judgements on what the world, ourselves and other people are like and what to expect from them. We form these judgements from the interactions that we have with caregivers and significant others and their attitudes and opinions. From these interactions we form particular core beliefs that help us to guide our behavior and provide a sense of structure to the world. These beliefs are usually set in early to mid-childhood stages of development but can be learned up until early adulthood. They are then tested through interactions that we have with the outside world.

As these beliefs are proven or disproven the core belief undergoes a validation and review process. If experiences do not fit with this belief, then it may be discarded. If experiences do fit the belief then it becomes further consolidated.

As more information is received to suggest that the core belief is 'true' then the process of review diminishes and we no longer question these core beliefs and accept them as the way that the world, self, and others are.

Example 1:

A child is told that it is dangerous to play outside with his friends. This leads to an initial core belief that 'The world is unsafe'. The child then experiences the death of a significant other. This helps to further consolidate this belief that the world is

unsafe. The child's modifies his behavior accordingly in order to maintain safety and consistency.

Example 2:

A young man who was brought up in an orphanage embarks on his first relationship. His partner then leaves him for someone else. His core belief, "I am un-loveable" is confirmed (in his eyes).

Often our NATS and core beliefs are not rational. All humans and particularly addicted people have a tendency to create what Aaron Beck termed "thought distortions". Your thought distortions can best be revealed or exposed by asking questions about what you are thinking. (See below: the thought distortions are in bold).

Common Thought Distortions

1. Am I **jumping to conclusions**?
2. Am I using ultimatum words like "must" or "should" (**Must- abating**)
3. Am I condemning myself or others on a single event? (**Overgeneralizing**)
4. Am I exaggerating my weaknesses and playing down my strengths?
(**Disqualifying the positive**)
5. Am I blaming myself for something which may not be my fault?
(**Personalizing**)
6. Do I have expectations of perfection? (**Perfectionism**)
7. Am I overestimating the chances of disaster? (**Awfulizing**)
8. Am I fretting about how this 'ought to be' rather than seeking acceptance? (**Non-Acceptance**)
9. Am I trying to predict the future? (Known as **Projecting** or **Fortune Telling**)
10. Am I ignoring contradictory information that conflicts with what I want?
(**Mental Filtering** or **Wishful Thinking**)

11. Am I making **Inflexible Demands**? “It *has* to be this way!”
12. Am I assuming that I know what someone else is thinking? (**Mind Reading**)
13. Do I have **Unreasonable Expectations** here? “People should always do what I want!”
14. Am I assuming that nothing will change my situation? (**Universal Negative Thinking**).
15. Am I condemning others on scanty evidence and making sweeping statement about them “Mr. A is an idiot!”. (**Labelling**)

Exercise 2

On the next page try to give one example of each thought distortion that you have had recently

| Thought distortion | Example |
|--------------------------------------|---------|
| Jumping to conclusions | |
| <i>Must-</i> abating | |
| Overgeneralizing | |
| Disqualifying the positive | |
| Personalizing | |
| Perfectionism | |
| Inflexible Demands | |
| Mind Reading | |
| Unreasonable Expectations | |
| Universal Negative Thinking | |
| Awfulizing | |
| Non-Acceptance | |
| Projecting or Fortune Telling | |
| Mental Filtering or Wishful Thinking | |

4. Disputing Irrational Beliefs

Core beliefs are like an auto-pilot setting. It doesn't matter how many times we change course (by noticing our thought distortions) our thinking will always re-direct to the underlying core belief. That is why they are called CORE beliefs. Therefore if we wish to begin truly changing our outlook, we need to change the core beliefs, not just the distorted fragments of our negative-automatic-self-talk.

As we have seen, we tend to learn our core beliefs from authority figures at different points in our lives, starting with parents and older siblings. Later we are influenced by friendship groups or work cultures. Addicted people tend to have highly negative and irrational core beliefs. Below are some examples of the negative core beliefs that are typical in addicted people.

- *I'm a bad person*
- *I don't fit in*
- *Life is unfair*
- *If you don't look after yourself no-one else will*

Albert Ellis believed that sometimes the bad things we think are true and cannot be disproved. For example, "life is unfair". We could say that in some contexts this is a perfectly rational and true statement. In this case we should instead try and approach it from a different angle, and be less demanding that things should always go our way.

Albert Ellis argued that it is only when we hold the irrational belief that "life should never be unfair" that we become emotionally disturbed. This is very similar to the Stoic, 12 Step, and Buddhist philosophies, which all state that a sense of acceptance is required in coming to terms with adverse events and gaining manageable feelings about them.

Examples of irrational, non-accepting core beliefs:

- “I’m a **100%** bad person”
- “If I screw up **nobody** will like me”
- “People should **never** do anything I don’t like”
- “Life should **always** go my way”

Notice how we have highlighted the words which make these statements extreme. The reason these core beliefs are irrational is because they are not realistic and they are overly extreme. Nobody can be 100% bad. People will inevitably do things we don’t like. And life will often go the way we least expect it to. To expect anything else is irrational.

Exercise 3

On the next page detail any negative or irrational core beliefs you can identify in yourself in the left column. In the right column balance this with any positive core beliefs you think you have.

5. Effective Behavior

Having found our thought distortions and irrational core beliefs we will need to build effective thinking by seeking acceptance over things, developing realistic expectations and asking ourselves questions like: *“what would positive people I know think about this?”*

We also need to ask ourselves what effective new behaviors will help to create healthier feelings within us. To help us do this there are a range of recovery actions which are used by 12 Step fellowships and other spiritual/psychological disciplines to directly change our dysregulated emotions and ineffective behaviors. The more we do these things the more we will train our brain to open up recovery ‘pathways’ which makes healthier thinking, feeling and behavior a habit.

One of the things that recovery groups (like 12 Step programs) tend to encourage, is what is known in CBT as ‘paradoxical behavior’. A paradoxical behavior is exactly what it sounds like – doing the opposite of what we want to do’ especially when we are faced with a situation which we know from experience, will end badly. Here are some examples of paradoxical behaviors:

- When you are having a craving – reach out and phone a recovery friend instead of your dealer.
- When you are feeling angry – use a breathing exercise to calm down your nervous system
- When you want to fire off an angry e-mail, write it out and then don’t send it (or leave it in ‘drafts’)
- When you are feeling lazy and want to just sit on the sofa and watch TV, go and exercise instead.

Exercise 4

In the space below try to think of a paradoxical behavior which would be better at managing your negative feelings than the actions you usually take.

| Negative feeling (and situation in occurred in) | Example of my usual ineffectual response | Example of a paradoxical behavior I could employ instead |
|---|--|--|
| <i>E.g. Feeling lazy last Saturday</i> | <i>E.g. I sat on the sofa and watched TV</i> | <i>E.g. I could have gone for a walk</i> |
| Feeling resentful | | |
| Feeling sad | | |
| Feeling stressed | | |
| Feeling scared | | |
| Feeling embarrassed | | |
| Feeling frustrated | | |

6. Using ABC

So now you have seen how to complete each part of an ABC it's time to put it all together. An ABC should be done when you are feeling bent of shape emotionally. If you don't have any disturbed emotions, then you don't have any need to do an ABC. However, most of us do, and especially in early recovery. For this reason it is wise to do at least one ABC every day when you are in the early phases of recovery.

Use all the tools you have learned (and use the **feelings checklist** and our list of **common thought distortions**). Blank ABC worksheets are available on the website. Also refer to the example of a completed ABC on the next page before beginning.

Exercise 5

1. Refer to the completed ABC on the next page
2. Then complete the blank ABC on the following page
3. Use the feelings checklist and the list of common thought distortions to help you

Example ABC

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>A – Activator <u>What happened?</u></p> <p>My partner criticized me and we got into an argument</p> | <p>C - Consequence <u>Disturbed feelings/ineffectual behaviors?</u></p> <p>Resentment. Raising my voice</p> |
| <p>B – Belief <u>What are you saying to yourself?</u></p> <p>“She’s an idiot!”</p> <p>“It’s so unfair”</p> <p>“She hates me”</p> <p>If she hates me that means I’m 100% bad”</p> <p>“Life sucks”</p> | <p>D - Dispute Belief <u>Thought distortions + core beliefs?</u></p> <p>Labelling: She has many good points</p> <p>Unrealistic expectation: Don’t forget. I have been drinking heavily for 10 years</p> <p>Overgeneralizing: there are still good things in our relationship.</p> <p>Disqualifying the positive: there are many good things about me.</p> <p>(Core belief). Universal negative thinking: This is way too inflexible.</p> |
| <p>E - Effective Action <u>Find a paradoxical behavior</u></p> <p>Accept that she has many feelings about the current situation and allow her space to talk.</p> <p>Maybe consider allowing a marriage guidance counsellor to act as a mediator.</p> <p>Talk about my feelings in fellowship meetings or with recovery peers</p> | |

ABC work sheet

| | |
|---|--|
| A – Activator <u>What happened?</u> | C - Consequence <u>Disturbed feelings/ineffectual behaviors?</u> |
| B – Belief <u>What are you saying to yourself?</u> | D - Dispute Belief <u>Thought distortions + core beliefs?</u> |
| E - Effective Action <u>Find a paradoxical behavior</u> | |