

Psycho-education

Ok Gemma, I thought it might be useful for me to provide you some information about me, the broad psychological framework I work within, and therefore some of the assumptions I have. I find this can be useful to give you insight into why I ask certain questions or perhaps focus on certain things. Is that alright with you?

Yeah, of course

Ok. So broadly I work within a paradigm called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, have you ever heard of that before?

Hmm, yeah I've heard of it but I don't really know what it means.

Well Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, or CBT, is an evidenced-based therapy. It can refer to a discrete and specific form of therapy or can be used to describe a broader framework. I'm going to describe the broader assumptions of CBT as a framework because there are lots of other forms of "therapies" that essentially have the same set of underlying assumptions. The thing is, when you come up with a "new" therapy, you can publish books and charge people loads of money for training *pause for raucous laughter...* but really, they're often saying the same thing using different language. I will often draw from these other types of therapies, which is why I discuss CBT as a broad framework.

Ok, CBT. Cognitive, what we think, behaviour, what we do. CBT focuses on what we think and what we do because these things influence how we feel. In turn, how you feel often influences how you behave and how you think.

[Part One – explain link of Thoughts – Behaviour – Emotion]

To give you a very simplistic example, do you like dogs?

Of course! I have two of my own¹. A big one named Mr Featherberry and a small one name Dot

Wonderful, now lets just pretend I don't like dogs. Imagine we were walking through a park together and you saw Mr Featherberry. Let's just pretend he was allowed to be out and about. Mr Featherberry then sees you and comes bounding to you, really fast.

What would you be thinking?

I would be thinking, 'Oh my goodness, what are you doing here you rascal? You're such a cutie'

Naturally! Then what do you think you would do?

I would pat him

And how do you think you would be feeling?

¹ If they happen not to like dogs [wtf as if] then this can still work but the roles will be switched, as you'll see.

Happy, excited...

Of course. So your thought would be ‘what a cutie’, your behaviour would be to pat him, and you would feel happy. Now, I’m with you remember and for some reason I don’t like dogs. Now I see this big dog, who I don’t know, come bounding towards us. What do you think I would be thinking?

Probably ‘Oh shit, this dog is going to attack me’

Exactly, so what do you think I would do?

Run away, perhaps

And how would I be feeling

Scared and anxious

Spot on. So now we have two different thoughts, leading to two different behaviours, which leads to two different emotions.

Now, the dog is not **making** me feel scared anymore than he is **making** you feel happy. My interpretation of the dog has led to my feeling. If the dog could make us feel something, we would all be feeling exactly the same, at exactly the same time. But we don’t. Nothing has that superpower.

Even if we think about something that would seem fairly universal or objective, like being hit in the face. Most of us would think that everyone would feel the same if that happened. But, one person may get hit and think “oh no I’m going to die”, and feel scared. Another person may get hit and think “who the hell is this, I’m going to smash them back”, and feel angry. And yet another may think “I deserve that, I’ve been so bad”, and feel guilt or remorse. Three thoughts, which leads to three emotions, and all probably accompany three different types of behaviours (cowering, hitting, apologising, respectively).

If we accept that thoughts and behaviours lead to our emotions then it means two things: first, that it is awesome, because it must also mean we have the ability to change them; second, that it comes with a whole lot of responsibility because now we must not blame other people, events, or situations for **making** us feel an emotion. And that is what most of us do, right? We say, “he made me feel sad”, “that thing makes me so scared”, “she always makes me angry”. Don’t get me wrong, we would sound like a bit of a dickhead if we always said “the awareness of my interpretation of that event has led to me feel X, Y or Z”, but I want to make sure we are both on the same page in recognising that it is actually the case.

[Part Two – explain that avoidance causes more problems]

So, back to the dog example. When I run away, **large exhale** phew, I feel good again. I haven’t been attacked. You see, the avoidance leads to a reduction in uncomfortable feelings – it feels

good. Simultaneously, the avoidance is being paired with the belief that “I’m not being attacked because I avoided the dog”.

Avoidance reinforces itself because it can cause a short-term positive feeling and a belief of safety. But of course, I was never actually in danger of Mr Featherberry. The avoidance didn’t make me safe because I was always safe.

Avoidance, therefore, has three core problems. When we avoid, we don’t get the opportunity to update our thoughts (such as “some dogs aren’t dangerous”), we don’t get to learn new skills (i.e., behaviours) to learn to cope with dogs, and we never get the opportunity to see that EVEN if the worst case scenario came true (such as the dog biting me), it would hurt, it would be painful...but that’s it. Life would go on. You would go to the doctor and have it fixed up – which isn’t nice – but your life would go on.

Most of the time we act as if the worst-case scenario would be absolutely devastating, life shattering, life ending perhaps. But rarely is it.

So, to recap. Avoidance is at the core of so many of our issues because we can’t update our thoughts, learn new skills (behaviours), or get to recognise that even if the worst-case scenario came true, we would be able to cope. It would be painful, but we’ve done painful before, and we’ve managed to get through it.

Going back to the dog example, if we accept that our thoughts and behaviours are the things that shape/curate our emotional experience we can do a couple of things. You could say to me, *Daniel, this dog isn’t a dangerous dog. I’ve known him for years and he’s never bitten or hurt anyone. I’m here with you and you’ll be absolutely fine.* See here, you would be trying to change my thoughts about the dog.

Or, you could say, *Daniel, I want you to come over here and we’re going to pat this dog together. I’m going to make sure he is facing away from you and, together, we’re going to pat him for just 10 seconds. Then we can have a break and try patting him for 30 seconds.* Here, you are trying to change my behaviour.

As you try and change my thoughts I’m more likely to pat the dog (i.e., change my behaviour) and as I change my behaviour by patting the dog, I’m more likely to update my thoughts (i.e., oh, this dog isn’t dangerous and isn’t biting me). Both of them together start to influence my emotions.

Don’t get me wrong, it is unlikely I’m going to feel elated or happy like you. But I will likely be reducing the intensity of my negative emotional experience.

[Part Three – explain emotions are safe]

Ok, so I've been explaining how our thoughts and behaviours create our emotions and, therefore, by changing our thoughts and behaviours we can change our emotional experience. However, I also want to stress that the emotions, in and of themselves, are NOT actually the problem.

The emotion is not the problem. What typically causes our suffering is the way we try to *avoid* or *get rid of* the emotions. [I purposely use the word "avoid" here to link to the previous section]

For example, the emotion of anger may physically feel uncomfortable (e.g., the feeling of heat rising in our stomach and chest, tension across our shoulders and in our fists) but when we try to get rid of anger by shouting, swearing, or hitting, those of the things that end up causing us suffering (i.e., they impact our relationships).

Or sadness. The emotion of sadness may, at times, feel uncomfortable (e.g., tightness in the chest, lump in the throat, tears in our eyes) but the suffering often comes about when we try to get rid of the emotion by, perhaps, eating unhealthy food, that might lead to guilt and weight gain.

Or anxiety. Anxiety can physically feel uncomfortable (e.g., tightness in chest, fast beating heart, trembling, sweaty) but the suffering is when we avoid trying to solve the problem, allowing it to get worse, or drinking ourselves into oblivion every night, increasing our risk-taking behaviours, causing hangovers, maybe missing work or other important events. These are the things that create suffering, not the experience of the emotion itself.

[Part Four – bringing it all together]

You might be thinking, *why bother changing my thoughts or behaviours if you're also saying that the emotion isn't even the problem*. Well, ultimately even if the emotion isn't the problem, if we're experiencing an intense emotional reaction, it can be bloody hard not to try and get rid of it in unhelpful ways, especially if it is our usual or habitual way of dealing with it.

So, we want to be able to change our thoughts and behaviours to reduce the intensity of the emotional experience AND simultaneously increase our capacity to tolerate the emotional experience so we don't end up trying to deal with it in ways that creates more problems and deeper suffering in our lives.

How does this sound? Does it make sense? Do you have any thoughts, comments, or questions so far?

No, that makes perfect sense! I see how all these things are connected.

Would you mind if you summarise what we've discussed so far, just so we can make sure we're definitely on the same page

Of course... [listen to what is being said, correcting any misunderstandings]

Amazing! That's exactly it. Now, there is one problem with all of this. I've explained this process to lots of people, and most people understand how it works. When I explain it, especially with the dog example, it seems so obvious that our thoughts and behaviours impact our emotions.

In reality, this can be exceptionally difficult. Especially when we apply it to difficult or painful aspects of our lives. We're trying to change habitual ways of thinking and behaving that have been developed over decades. It can be hard work. But, if you were going to a personal trainer you would expect that the session might be hard work. It might even be painful and you could be sore for a couple of days afterwards. You would keep at it though, knowing that you are getting physically stronger each time. That can sometimes be like the therapeutic process. It can, at times, be painful. You also might be sore for a couple of days. But this is you getting emotionally, psychologically stronger, and I'm going to be here, supporting you each step of the way.

What questions do you have for me at the moment?

Therapy often has these underlying goals:

A clinician's perspective:

1. Increase client's insight and awareness (particularly to the conditions that may contribute to their problems such as unhelpful thoughts and behaviours)
2. Increase client's flexibility with the way they think and behaviour
3. Increase client's capacity to tolerate uncomfortable emotions/sensations associated with the emotion

Translated into a client's perspective:

1. Increased ability to recognise my thoughts, behaviours, and emotions
2. Increased ability to change my thoughts, behaviours, and emotions
3. Increased ability to cope with painful emotions