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Accessing Meanings

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Accessing Meanings

As we have highlighted already, understanding the way we cope with situations and manage our emotions is about looking at the ways in which we 'perceive' things (cognitive) and what we 'do' about them (behavioural).

Our perceptions are a reflection of our unique personality and are as individual as we are.

Throughout our early years we lay down and develop our beliefs about the world, ourselves and others and this guides how we look at situations now, the meaning of them to us and our emotional, physical and behavioural responses to them (see the section on 'cognitive behavioural approaches at the start of this booklet to remind yourself of this if you need to).

Mostly we respond emotionally, behaviourally and biologically without a conscious awareness of our perceptions or meanings as these are generally laid deeper in our unconscious and form part of who we are. They have been with us so long that we have 'habituated' to them, that is to say they are like second nature to us. If you think of driving a car as an example, you can see that initially when learning to drive, we have thoughts of direction which are new to us (e.g. mirror, signal, maneuver) but when we have learnt this skill and have been driving regularly, these thoughts of direction become unconscious. This is the same with all of our thought processes, as they become habit the brain processes them on a more unconscious and rapid level.

This process of learning serves a very adaptive function as it enables us to utilize our brainpower more effectively and free up more of our conscious thought processing for other things. However sometimes when our perceptions are inaccurate and cause us distress, we may not consciously be aware of the specific perceptions that may be causing this distress.

Using a cognitive behavioural approach we can take time to reflect on situations that are problematic and break open the habit to access the cognitive processes behind our responses (emotional, behavioural, biological). This can be helpful in understanding ourselves better and assisting with promoting change where this may be necessary, as well as reducing distress.

This section will now consider two cognitive approaches that assist us in accessing our meanings and gaining a better understanding of what is

happening to us. These are the '*ABC analysis*' and the '*downward arrow technique*'. These techniques work well together and will now be explained. At the end of this section there is an example, which highlights how they might be used in practice, as well as blank worksheets for you to use yourself.

The ABC Analysis

What is it?

The ABC analysis was developed by a psychologist called Albert Ellis (1985). It involves a structure by which we can pull out the meaning of situations as well as the consequences of them. This allows us to see more clearly why certain triggers can lead us to respond in certain ways. You may remember the example of the 'hot date' in the earlier section on understanding a CB approach. This highlights that the same event (someone not attending for dinner) can lead to different emotional, physical and biological responses based on our 'perception' of the event (anger, anxiety, sadness, guilt).

The ABC analysis allows you to reflect on past situations where you have felt distressed in some way and gives you a structure to assist in accessing your meaning of the event and so give you a better insight into your distress, as well as highlighting any irrational or inaccurate thoughts, which may be causing you some problems.

How do you do it?

The ABC analysis begins with identifying the **A**, which stands for the activating event.

- Simply write down an event or situation in which you experienced a strong negative emotion.
- Record the situation in the same way a video camera might record it-just the facts.

- This means that you do not include your thoughts about why the situation occurred or who was responsible and how you felt about it. Just describe the event.
- The next step is to identify the **C**, which stands for consequences, and this includes your feelings and your actions/behaviours
- Write down the words that best describe your feelings. Choose the emotion that best reflects the emotion you actually felt at the time and underline it. Then rate the intensity of this emotion 0-100. The higher the number the more intense the emotion. You might also want to note any actions you carried out.
- Now bearing in mind the situation and the feelings you experienced, identify the **B**, which stands for beliefs or thoughts, expectations, perceptions and attitude.
- Ask yourself: what was I thinking when the event occurred?
- What was going through my mind at the time?
- Write down all of the thoughts in a list.
- When you have completed the task, read through each statement and underline the thought that is most associated with the primary emotion you felt during **A**.
- Now rate how much you believe this thought on a scale of 0-100
- This is what we call your “hot thought” that is to say the thought that is most significant in driving your primary distress in this specific situation.
- Once you have identified this thought you can develop a further understanding of your meaning of it by using the downward arrow technique.

The Downward Arrow Technique

The downward arrow technique takes the 'hot thoughts' from our ABC analysis and funnels them down to what we call the 'bottom line' meaning of what the trigger event means to us. It is reached by taking the hot thought from the ABC and asking ourselves "If this were true then what would it mean to me?" This question is then repeated until we reach our bottom line.

ABC Example (*Emma*)

Emma was a manager at a company had recently received an annual review from her line manager that was critical. She had been very upset during the meeting with her manager and had been off from work for a few days, as she felt very tearful. She was now back at work but still struggling with feeling anxious and low. Emma had become very panicky in the week when struggling to do a small piece of work that she would normally cope with. Things had started to go down hill and she was finding it increasingly difficult to work and felt very anxious and low most of the time now. She had been struggling to sleep at night and was feeling tired and emotional.

The ABC sheet below highlights the meaning she had attached to this occasion when she had struggled

ABC Example (Emma)

<p style="text-align: center;">A</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ACTIVATING EVENT</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B</p> <p style="text-align: center;">BELIEFS</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">C</p> <p style="text-align: center;">CONSEQUENCES</p>
<p>Sat at my desk working on a task, notice that I am struggling with some aspects of it</p>	<p>"What's wrong with me?"</p> <p>"I can't do this"</p> <p>"I need to take a break"</p> <p>"A walk would probably help me"</p> <p>"You need to get this done though"</p> <p>"You shouldn't have to keep walking away"</p> <p>"People will notice"</p> <p>"What will others think?"</p>	<p>EMOTIONS</p> <p>Anxiety (75%)</p> <p>Irritability (40%)</p> <p>Sad (70%)</p> <p>PHYSICAL</p> <p>Sweaty</p> <p>Hot</p> <p>Heart racing</p> <p>Confused</p> <p>Cant Focus</p> <p>BEHAVIOUR</p> <p>Just sat there panicky for ages feeling stuck</p>

The ABC analysis highlights that the distress Emma felt was related to the meaning she attached to struggling on this one piece of work. On reflection Emma she could see that her emotional response was out of proportion to the event itself. On a logical level she could see that often at work we have times when we have a blank on things or we have less concentration at certain times of the day etc and that usually she would have just put the task aside and either worked on something else or taken a break. However on this occasion she had felt frozen with anxiety and started to feel a real sense of hopelessness. Her most distressing thought was “I can’t do this!”

Downward Arrow Example (*Emma*)

Using the downward arrow Emma was able to take her “hot thought” “ I can’t do this!” to further her understanding of why this had had such an impact on her. She could recognize that people could often have a thought like that in life over many different things and it not have such a negative and distressing impact on her as she gained more understanding. By asking herself “So what if this were true, what would it mean to me?” she was able to reach the bottom line meaning of the event for her and understand why she had felt so bad.

The Example below shows where this goes for this individual.

“I can’t do this”



“If I can’t do this then I could be in trouble”



“My manager won’t be happy”



“Well he has already said that I’m not performing in some areas”



“He could get rid of me”



“I’ll lose my job”



“I’m useless”

Emma was able to reflect on why she had felt so distressed and low over the event. She was able to see that logically it would be unlikely that she would lose her job over just struggling with one piece of work. However it also highlighted that she was feeling anxious about her recent review and the criticism she had received. She realized that she did not have a clear idea of what her manager felt she was doing wrong or how she was expected to improve. She was able to develop this understanding into an action plan of setting a goal to speak with her manager to ask him specifically what he needed from her as she was unclear about this and as such was feeling anxious about everything.