

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

PERSONAL COUNSELING CENTER

Don't Think of Elephants

Hey Everyone,

Happy August. I hope this letter finds you thriving in what has been one of the more interesting summers I have ever experienced. It seems like we are in an endless loop of the same day over and over. If you've never seen the movie "Groundhog Day" I highly recommend it, A: because Bill Murry is a delight, and B: because the movie is basically our lives for the past 5 months. Can you believe March was 5 months ago? Does anyone remember April? Did I sleep through May? Who knows at this point?

I hope my last newsletter was helpful in describing how counseling works and looks in practice. I wanted to provide some insight into my side of it, what goes through my mind as we talk and what the method to my madness is. This week I wanted to expand a bit more on one of the concepts I introduced and talk more about Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Specifically, I wanted to touch on some of the techniques and concepts which make it (in my opinion) such an effective theory to use when we treat mental illness.

To briefly recap CBT: Thoughts -> Emotions -> Behaviors. Our thoughts control everything, shaping the emotions we experience and influencing the choices we make. The primary goal of CBT is to increase your awareness of unhelpful thought patterns and then give you tools to change the way you think.

First major concept: **Automatic Thinking**. As you read this, answer these questions: Did you shower today or yesterday? If your answer is yes, do you remember the entire experience? From the second you stepped foot into the shower all the way to you rinsing off and getting out, do you remember every step? Chances are you don't. Your whole morning routine is automatic. Your brain knows what it's doing, and you get to operate on auto-pilot thinking about other things. Next question, when you last drove home, do you remember the drive in between Big Rapids and your destination? Or do you just basically remember pulling into your driveway? The journey is automatic, your brain knows where you are going, and driving doesn't require much cognitive power. Last question: $2+2=?$, Chances are the number four was very easy to come up with. You didn't have to do mental math in your head, your brain just spit out the answer. These are all examples of automatic thoughts/behaviors. Our brains have evolved this ability as a way to conserve calories. When we were a hunting and gathering society, calories were scarce. If we didn't kill anything, we didn't eat. It was helpful to our bodies to hold on to as many calories as possible. Once our brain knows how to do something, it creates a kind of muscle

memory and makes it easier (consumes less calories) to continue the behavior. This can become problematic when our automatic thoughts cause unhelpful emotional responses. Take this example: You are walking to class and you see your best friend 50 feet ahead of you. They look back toward you, you look at them and wave. Your friend doesn't wave back and walks into class. In that moment, what is the first thought that comes to your mind? A common answer clients give me is that "my friend must be mad at me" or "what did I do wrong for them not to wave back?". How does this make us feel? Sad, mad, anxious? Why didn't you think "oh, they must have not seen me". The second thought causes a neutral emotional response and makes the most logical sense in this situation. If you weren't fighting with your friend before class and they are 50 feet ahead of you, it's very likely they could be looking in your general direction but don't see you. In therapy we look to improve a client's awareness of these less helpful, often illogical, thought patterns so we can change them and improve their mood. Click [Here](#) if you would like to learn more about automatic thoughts and see some worksheets to help you work through them.

The next concept I want to introduce is **Cognitive Reframing**. We use reframing to help us change the way we think. We all have a perspective and often that perspective is influenced by our emotional state. If you feel depressed, then that will likely influence your perspective to be negative and pessimistic. Feel happy? Then you are likely to have a positive optimistic outlook. When we use reframing the goal is to open our perspective to the bigger picture. If you are having a really bad day, chances are you are focusing on ONLY the aspects of the day that suck. Say you fail a test and forget to turn your homework in for another class. For some of us, this could be a recipe for a bad day. If we use the reframing approach in this situation, we validate that failing a test and forgetting homework sucks, but it happens, we are all human. We look for other aspects of the situation to balance things out. We explore other positive aspects that happened that day, we talk about how everyone forgets things sometimes, we remind ourselves that there will be more tests and opportunities to increase your grade. The goal of reframing is not to invalidate yourself or try to make yourself feel like failing a test is a good thing, but rather to bring your attention to a more full picture that takes multiple things into account making a bad situation less overwhelming. Another good example is when we compare ourselves to others. We often compare our weaknesses to other's strengths. We look at our grade and compare them to everyone with a better score putting us last. When we reframe this situation, we need to compare ourselves to everyone, those who scored better and those who scored worse giving us a more realistic picture of our situation helping us feel less overwhelmed. The cool part about this tool is the more you use it, the more automatic it becomes. Once you make a habit of reframing situations you will unconsciously look at a bigger picture rather than getting stuck on just a single mistake.

Core Schema or core beliefs, are responsible in a big way for why we think the way we do. Core Schema are the principals we live our lives by. They are things we "know" about ourselves and they are often the root cause of our dysfunctional thoughts. Schemas are developed as we grow, often taught to us by our parents or early peer groups. There are positive and negative core beliefs. In therapy we spend time looking at a client's negative beliefs. How did they develop? How are they reinforced? How are they manifesting currently in their lives? An example might help. A very common negative core belief is "I am not good enough". Often this belief starts when we are young and its reinforced through

confirmation bias (Learn more about that [HERE](#)). Every time you fail a test or lose a friend for example your brain thinks to itself “see another reason why I am not good enough”. Your brain automatically discounts any evidence that would challenge this belief serving to strengthen the negative Core Schema. In therapy we will spend time looking at the different incidents that “proved” you weren’t good enough, reframe them, and then work to pull in the huge amount of evidence that points to you in fact being good enough. Core Schema are powerful beliefs that we hold onto tightly even when they are hurting us. Changing them can be one of the more challenging aspects of a counseling experience. [Here](#) is an interesting Youtube video about thought reframing and how beliefs are built.

One final idea I want to touch on is our ability to change and control the way we think. Most people tend to overestimate their perceived ability to control their thoughts and underestimate their ability to permanently change the way they think. The difference between these two concepts are subtle, but very important.

Controlling your thoughts completely or stopping emotions in the moment is not a realistic expectation. I have clients insist that they should be able to control their emotions. They become so frustrated that they can’t stop the anxious thinking. Our brains are always taking in new stimuli and deciding if the information is important or not. This creates thoughts and emotions. I will give you an example, I am about to control your mind for one second through this newsletter (I am that good). Are you ready?.....*Don’t think of elephants*.....How many elephants came to mind? Being told not to think about anything is a stimuli your brain has to quickly react to. That reaction caused the image to appear in your head as you identified an elephant and then tried not to think about it. I bring this up because I want you to show yourself some compassion when it comes to your thoughts. We ALL struggle with unhelpful thoughts sometimes. When we fail a test, an incredibly common initial thought could be “I am so stupid”. Rather than beating yourself up because you are having a depressed thought, show yourself love and acceptance recognizing your value and work through that disappointment.

While controlling or stopping thoughts outright is difficult, we are all more than capable of changing the way we think. I have had clients in the past insist that they have always struggled with anxious thinking and they are sure that will never change. Think of your problematic thinking as a bad habit like chewing your nails. If left unchecked, you will continue to bite those nails. It is an automatic behavior that your brain often defaults to. However, we can change bad habits the same way we can change negative thoughts, with increased awareness and practice of new behaviors (or thoughts). When you notice yourself biting your nails, stop the behavior and introduce a new one. With enough repetitions the unwanted behavior will slowly go away. We approach changing your thoughts the same way. Lets say you struggle with body image and every time you look in the mirror, you only focus on parts of your body that you dislike. This seems unhelpful and is likely causing some issues. Next time you are in front of a mirror force yourself to find things that you do like about yourself. It that is challenging than start with looking for things you don’t hate about the way you look. Rinse, wash, repeat. What you are doing is training your brain to respond differently to the same kind of stimuli. You can use this approach with any kind of unhelpful thought. Do you often find you are overly critical of yourself? Purposely compliment your strengths daily. Every time you successfully notice an unhelpful thought and

pivot to a helpful one, you re-wire your brain to think differently and over time these ways of thinking become new habits, which will become new automatic thoughts.

I hope these concepts were helpful. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy makes a lot of sense to me. It fits with how I conceptualize the way humans work. If we are having negative thoughts all the time, then working to increase positive thoughts will change the way we feel. If we start to do a better job to think about how awesome we are and focus less on our mistakes, everything can change. Your homework this week to increase your awareness of some automatic thinking that causes you problems. Are you too hard on yourself? Are you looking at situations through a distorted perspective? Once you recognize a common thought that is unhelpful, push yourself to reframe and then practice. It will be hard at first but that is ok. This is new. You can't expect to be great at something when you first start. With practice you will see how awesome you really are.

Take Care of Yourselves and Wash Your Hands,

Andy