



Free as a Butterfly

Cognitive and Behavioural Therapy

There is a reason that I separate the words cognitive and behavioural before the word Therapy. The reason is because different issues need different strategies in order to fully understand why the problem exists and the approach required to make the necessary adjustments to get a more desired outcome.

If we look at anger as an example, the cognitive element plays a far more significant role in determining the problematic root cause rather than the subsequent behaviour. A key principle in cognitive behavioural therapy is to emphasise the choices we make and how this directly impacts the differing outcomes we get. Sometimes we are so wrapped up in our own devices that we forget about our fundamental freedom of choice. By devices I mean the inherent blueprint of life by which we work. The decisions and choices we make stem from our core values, our biases and our cognitive distortions (we all have them). Our choices are made from the raw assumptions that this blueprint of life is correct but this fallacy can hide our ability to identify clarity and balance. By assuming these rules to be indisputably true this deters us from challenging their integrity or foundation at the cost of forgetting that we always have the power to change our minds. To put it another way, to do things with the courage of our own convictions.

How many times do we live by defeating self fulfilling prophecies? The 'I'm not good enough' principle. I know I won't succeed, I'm not strong enough, I simply can't do that, nothing good ever happens to me. Often we will very carefully filter out all the positives so the negatives get pride of place. We might receive twenty compliments but it would only take one criticism to banish them all into oblivion.

Living in the structure of a rigid set of beliefs is a dysfunctional influence. All the time we have rigid beliefs, we can lose sight of the fact that our beliefs are only ideas of what we believe to be true and not necessarily facts. We may cling so strongly to these beliefs that we fail to let even the slightest glimpse of new information in to allow us to form a new, better, more insightful and more reasonable opinion. It's the truth that sets us free, maturing to understand the false beliefs and inaccuracies by which we have based our foundations of expectation upon. If we propose change in order to achieve something better than what we have, then rigid is not applicable. It simply doesn't work because being rigid means the desire to remain the same is greater than the desire to change.

For change to occur, the habit of analysing and critiquing our limiting beliefs is vital. As human beings, most of us are terrible at self critiquing, so we mostly go with 'this is what I have always done, so this is what I will always get' principle. No one likes to be judged or proved wrong, criticised or scrutinised in any way yet if we believe that the way we are is faultless then we truly are flawed individuals. How many perfect people do you know? What does perfect even mean? A common expression these days when looking at certain individuals is 'they've got it all together'. But do they? We all have many sides to us, the sides we let people see, the sides we don't let people see and the sides of us that we can't see ourselves.

In cognitive terms, we have three levels of existence, consciousness, subconsciousness and unconsciousness but which one has the major influence over our behaviours and actions? What do people really crave for in life? Is it excitement, improved intellect and knowledge, financial reward, power, possessions, peace, safety or something else? The pursuit of happiness is an interesting and endless one. What does happy mean? Well the best rendition of happiness that I would be able to offer would be short term gratification. For some people this would mean a new car or some new jewellery, perhaps a gamble on the horses, a bar of chocolate, a glass of wine, an enjoyable experience, a loving relationship, coming first in a competition, winning a prize and so on. But is happiness a genuine pursuit when it comes to life, isn't life a bit more complex than that? After all, emotions come and emotions go.

You can follow this train of thought with a simple example of someone looking for their first property. They find a one bedroom flat in a great location with all mod cons so they buy the property. They are 'happy' for a couple of years at least but then they feel that this property is a little on the small side furthermore their needs have changed so they look again and find a two bedroom house with a garden. Perfect, they buy it and they are again 'happy'. But after three more years their situation changes and so do their expectations so they now have a partner and perhaps looking to start a family, so they look at a three bedroom detached house with a garage near a nice school and buy the property that matches this description and this makes them once again 'happy'. You can see the pattern emerging but suppose they now had to go back to their original property. Would that now make them happy?

Philosophically speaking, fulfilment and contentment would seem to be a much better and sustainable pursuit. It certainly doesn't seem that wealth equals happiness or power, or looks or anything that has a temporary basis to underpinning self gratification. Fulfilment is knowing that you want to grow in purpose, in what you offer and in both what inspires you and how you inspire others. What will your legacy be, what will be written on your grave stone to describe the person that you would want to be and want to be remembered as being.

When you embark on the cognitive behavioural therapeutic journey, there are certain aspects that you need to fully understand. Clarity is crucial so be sure to be under no misapprehensions as to what cognitive and behavioural therapy will offer you and what the requirements are from both parties. Honesty and a committed relationship is a must in order to fully explore the unhealthy assumptions and behaviours that are having such a destructive effect. You are working in collaboration with your practitioner and not against them. If your idea is to sit down with someone and say to them "OK fix me" then this will end in tears.

No therapist, analyst or counsellor has this power, it doesn't exist. If you do encounter somebody who suggests they have this super power, be very very sceptical. The cognitive behavioural approach accepts the premise that as human beings we are not broken, but we are 'meaning' makers. We do however make mistakes and ill-conceived choices which produces undesired outcomes. The ultimate goal for your collaborative relationship with your practitioner is to offer new insights that will help ground you in making better choices and healthier perspectives. This is something that you take with you and that will allow you to pause and question and not so readily accept preexistent ideas as unchallenged facts.

We also have to remind ourselves of the roller coaster of emotions we experience, we are never constantly in the grip of one emotion all of the time, even if it sometimes feels that way. Emotions ebb and wane and are never stuck in one position, they fluctuate according to the stimuli presented to us. What one person sees as frightening another will see as exciting.

An interesting point here is to take into account that no situation, place or external situation adjusts your emotions. It is only the thought processes or perceptions in the mind that creates these fluctuations. That is an indisputable fact. Fear or anger or sadness or happiness are all generated from you. A good example of this is you can watch a film and feel every type of emotion, yet in reality nothing has changed. You are watching moving pictures and listening to words which are processed internally to generate a feeling based response. Despite what you may think, you are an island, no actual physical or mental attachment to anyone or anything. The human mind adopts patterns of behaviour and emotional response over a period of time from the moment we are born.

These patterns of thought can be both helpful and unhelpful, but remember we are only ever one decision away from changing our lives completely. The expression 'I had no choice' does not apply when talking in cognitive and behavioural terms. The ability to examine, analyse, question and change is with us all. It really boils down to whether we are willing to invest enough time and devotion to put this into practice. With scrutiny comes the ability to assess. With assessment comes the right to make judgement and when we make judgement we have the means to change. These are inescapable truths but we can accept them or discard them. The choice is yours.

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