

Back from the Bluez

Module 4

The ABC Analysis

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The ABC Analysis

We've talked about the way our thoughts affect how we feel. If we are feeling happy and excited, chances are, we have been thinking positive thoughts and about positive things. On the other hand, if we are feeling anxious, depressed, and upset, it is likely that we have been thinking negative thoughts. We call these unhelpful thoughts (simply because they lead to unpleasant feelings or unhelpful actions!). All of us, at times, think things that make us feel sad or anxious, and that is a normal part of life. However, if you often feel distressed or anxious, you might need to examine your thinking to improve how you feel.

If unhelpful thoughts lead to distressing emotions, then it might be quite reasonable to say that the most effective thing to do is to change those unhelpful thoughts to helpful ones! So, how can you do that? To start influencing the way you feel, you need to learn to be aware of, and "capture," those unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, with the ultimate aim of changing them. To do that, let's start with doing an ABC analysis.

The ABC analysis begins with identifying the 'A' which stands for 'Activating Event.' Simply write down an event or a situation in which you experienced a strong negative emotion, such as, depression. Record the situation 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, who was responsible, and how you felt about it. Just describe the event simple, without any 'frills.'

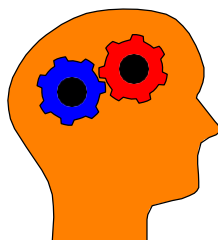


The next step is to identify the 'C' which stands for 'Consequences,' and this includes both your feelings and your actions/behaviour. Write down the words that best describe your feelings. Choose the feeling that best represents the emotion you actually felt at the time and underline it. Then rate the intensity of this emotion from 0 to 100. The higher the number, the more intense the emotion. You might also want to note any actions that you carried out, for example, drawing all the curtains, putting on the answering machine, and going to bed.



Now, bearing in mind the situation and the feelings you experienced, identify the 'B,' which represents your 'Beliefs' or thoughts, expectations, perceptions, and attitudes. Ask yourself "What was I thinking of when the event occurred?" "What was going through my mind at the time?" Write down all of these thoughts in a list. When you have completed this task, read through each statement and then underline the thought that is most associated with the primary emotion you felt during the 'A'. We'll now call it your hot thought. Now rate how much you believe this thought on a scale from 0 to 100.

A. Activating Event
(Situation)



B. Beliefs (thoughts)

C. Consequences (Feelings & Actions)

Let's look at an example. Imagine walking into a party and feeling anxious. To do an ABC analysis, you might ask yourself, "How am I making myself anxious? What am I thinking?" You might identify a thought such as, "I don't want to be here." If you only had this thought, you'd probably not experience a strong emotion but only feel mildly anxious. If you do experience a strong emotional response to this thought, it probably indicates that there are other thoughts underlying this thought. Therefore, the thought, "I don't want to be here" is only an initial thought, and you would need to discover what other unhelpful thoughts were present to invoke such a strong emotional response.

How to Uncover Your Unhelpful Thoughts

By asking yourself a number of questions, you can uncover any other unhelpful thoughts underlying an initial thought. Let's use the example of being at the party to identify the unhelpful thoughts underlying the initial thought "I don't want to be here." The following is a description of the thoughts that might be going through your head as you uncover other unhelpful thoughts. The questions in bold are your unhelpful thought discovery questions.



"I don't want to be here".

"I don't want to be here because...?"

"...people will look at me and know that I am depressed"

"...and that is bad because...?"

"Well, they will think something is wrong with me"

"...and what is bad about that..?"

"....They will think I'm crazy!"

"...and what does that say about me?"

".....that I must be crazy."



Your task is to become an expert at identifying your unhelpful thoughts. Sometimes, one or two thoughts might not represent the other unhelpful ones you might have had. As such, to get to those other thoughts, you might need to ask some of the following questions, called Thought Discovery Questions:

"What is bad about that?"

"What is it that I see happening in this situation?"

"What am I concluding about myself or others in this situation?"

"... and that is bad because ..."

"... and what does this say about me ...?"

It is best to be as specific as you can, even if some of your unhelpful thoughts sound stupid or embarrassing when you think about them. Discovering your unhelpful thoughts, no matter how silly they sound, is important in learning how to better manage your mood.

After you have done this, we will tackle the issue of where we go from here. At this point, it is important that you understand how to identify your feelings and thoughts surrounding a particular situation, especially one in which you experienced unhelpful, negative emotions. When a person experiences unhelpful emotions, they might get a stronger physical reaction in their body, such as a tightness in the chest when anxious, an increase in blood pressure when angry, or a sense of heaviness when depressed. Emotions such as depression, guilt, fear, rage, and anxiety might also lead to avoidance and unhelpful behaviours towards yourself and others, get in the way of effective problem solving, and contribute to long term difficulties such as hypertension, heart disease, interpersonal problems, and psychological problems. Doing the ABC analysis is taking the first step toward learning to better manage your mood and helping yourself feel better.

On the next page is a Thought Diary for you to start doing an ABC analysis and recording your unhelpful thoughts. Here's an example of an ABC analysis recorded on a Thought Diary:

Thought Diary (example)

A Activating Event

This may include an actual event or situation, a thought, mental picture or physical trigger.

When my partner came home this evening, she said 'hi' but didn't give me a kiss like she usually does.

C Consequences

1. Write down words describing how you feel.
2. Underline the one that is most associated with the activating event.
3. Rate the intensity of those feelings (0 to 100).

Hurt

Afraid (90)

4. Jot down any physical sensations you experienced or actions carried out.

Chest feels very tight and sore

B Beliefs

1. List all self-statements that link A to C. Ask yourself: "What was I thinking?" "What was I saying to myself?" "What was going through my head at the time?"
2. Find the most distressing (hot) thought and underline it.
3. Rate how much you believe this thought between 0 to 100.

"She must be tired of me moping around and feeling depressed."

Thought discovery question: "... and what does this mean?"

"She probably doesn't care about me anymore. Maybe she doesn't even love me anymore." (90)

Thought Diary

A Activating Event

This may include an actual event or situation, a thought, mental picture or physical trigger.

C Consequences

1. Write down words describing how you feel.
2. Underline the one that is most associated with the activating event.
3. Rate the intensity of this feeling between 0 and 100.

4. Jot down any physical sensations you experienced or actions carried out.

B Beliefs

1. List all the self-statements that link A to C. Ask yourself: "What was I thinking?", "What was I saying to myself?", "What was going through my head at the time?"
2. Find the most distressing ("hot") thought and underline it.
3. Rate how much you believe this thought between 0 and 100.

Module Summary

- What really makes us feel the way we do, is not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but our thoughts and beliefs in response to that situation or person
- When a person experiences a negative or distressing emotion, this is usually because they have been thinking negative thoughts
- These negative thoughts are also called unhelpful thoughts because they lead to unpleasant feelings or unhelpful actions
- To begin to influence and change the way you feel, you need to be aware of your unhelpful thoughts
- Using a Thought Diary, identify the 'A' - activating event, 'B' - beliefs, thoughts, or expectations that went through your mind at the time of the event, and 'C' - consequences, which are your emotional and behavioural responses

Stay Tuned...

In the next module, we will discuss specific trends or patterns to unhelpful thoughts that maintain unhelpful feelings and behaviours.

About The Modules

BACKGROUND

This module was created in the early 2000s by Clinical Psychologists at the Centre for Clinical Interventions, under the supervision of the Centre's Founding Director, Paula Nathan.

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for depression and anxiety is based on the approach that depression and anxiety are the result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

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These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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“BACK FROM THE BLUEZ”

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