Mindfulness and Cognitive Defusion Skills for Managing Difficult Thoughts

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Thank You

• For your interest in this workshop and deciding to attend
• For attending the conference
• For being a social worker—I value sharing this practice with you

Plan

✓ Foundational information
✓ Experiential exercises
✓ Discussion/questions

• My sincere hope is that the material I share and our time together today is beneficial to you
The “Three Waves” of Behavior Therapy

• “First Wave”-Behavior therapy
  ✔ Extensive focus on observable behavior and learning principles (reinforcement, conditioning, etc.)

• “Second Wave”-Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT)
  ✔ Placed emphasis on thoughts as a mental behavior and the role of self-talk, rules, assumptions, beliefs, etc.

• “Third Wave”-Contextual or Process-Based CBT
  ✔ More emphasis on the role of context and function on understanding behavior
The “Three Waves” of Behavior Therapy

• Some third wave therapies include:
  ✓ Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT)
  ✓ Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)
  ✓ Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT)
  ✓ Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)
Classical Assumption of CBT

Thoughts -> Feelings -> Behaviors
Classical Assumption of CBT

Ellis’ ABC Model

• A-activating experience or event (some type of situation, circumstance, interaction, physical sensation, feeling, thought/memory) gets our attention

• B-belief about A (the way we think about it, how we interpret, explain, evaluate, judge, make sense of, give meaning to A, conclusions we come to about A, assumptions about A, what we tell our self about A, how we attribute, appraise, perceive A)

• C-emotional and/or behavioral consequence of B on how we feel and how we behave

• D-dispute, debate B (reassess the belief, how accurate is the belief? What’s the evidence that supports/does not support it? How logical/illogical?)

• E-new, more effective, accurate belief(s) and improved feelings and behaviors
Classical Assumption of CBT

- So from this paradigm...
  - To change emotions and behaviors you have to change thoughts
  - The **content** of thoughts has to be challenged and corrected (ex. Cognitive distortions)
  - **EX.** “I am a horrible person”
  - Thought/beliefs leads to feeling depressed, hopeless and behavioral avoidance (opportunities, relationships)
  - So have to challenge, modify the content of the thought and cognitive distortions
  - “I’m not a horrible person; I am a good person with good qualities”
Contextual Assumption

• It is not the content of the thought that is the problem, it is the way the person is relating to and responding to the thought, i.e. the function of thinking

✓ Might not actually be able to completely change or get rid of certain thoughts and beliefs

✓ Attempting to do so might actually intensify and prolong

• Contextual assumption is that psychological difficulties are generated by patterns of experiential avoidance- engaging in very rigid and inflexible patterns of avoidance towards inner experiences (sensations, emotions, thoughts/memories) so as to escape, avoid, suppress, minimize experiences

• Life is only workable and livable if I do not have X

• I cannot to Y until X goes away
Experimental Avoidance Metaphors

• Passengers on a bus (4:52)
  https://youtu.be/Z29ptSuoWRc
• Internal hijackers (3:28)
  https://youtu.be/NdaCEO4WtDU
• Unwelcomed party guest (4:20)
  https://youtu.be/VYht-guymF4
Cognitive Fusion

• Thinking is not “bad”, our thinking and problem solving helps us to accomplish amazing things in life, the challenge is...

• **Cognitive fusion**—when words and the events they describe and refer to begin to be treated as if they were the same thing.

✓ People begin to see, treat and react to thoughts as if they were literal truths that directly cause our behavior and must be acted upon.

✓ Problem is not having the “wrong thoughts” but spending too much time “in thoughts” and “looking through thoughts”.

✓ Leads to unhelpful efforts trying to control thinking or altering its form (content), end up buying, believing, holding onto our thoughts even when doing so is no longer useful or helpful.
Cognitive Defusion

• Term created by ACT researchers and clinicians to undermine the literality of thinking, help to “de-fuse” thinking from it seeming to be the exact same as what it describes

• Original term the developers of MBCT used was helping people to de-center from their thinking

• Weakens the literality, function of thinking

• Helps to see thoughts as thoughts as opposed to literal truths that have to be acted on

• Changes perspective on, relationship to thinking

• Paul Gilbert- “my clients with long-term depression were able to see that their thoughts were not accurate, but that didn’t make them feel better”
Mindfulness exercises

• Labeling thoughts as thoughts in a gentle inner voice
• “So you noticed that you were having the thought I am a horrible person”
• Leaves on a stream, clouds in the sky, passing train cars
Defusion exercises

• “I can’t walk across the room”
• “Milk, milk, milk”
• Take your mind for a walk
• Changing the tone of voice
• Announcer, bad news radio
“Hello Clarice...”
“...I’m on the edge...”

Because I’m...
...living in a van down by the river
Perhaps a change to Ellis...

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• **C**-emotional and/or behavioral consequence of B on how we feel and how we behave

• **D**-*de-center, defuse* from B

• **E**-new, more effective and *flexible* patterns of behavior

*From this perspective challenging self-talk and beliefs might be less about changing them but more about undermining their believability*
Considerations

• Need to be compassionate towards thinking and its power
  ✓ Don’t want to end up invalidating peoples’ experiences or making them feel “stupid” for the thoughts they have
  ✓ “Well you just need to come to see that your thinking is not true”

• Within ACT cognitive defusion techniques are one set of practices within a larger treatment model and context, used in tandem with other skills (contact with the present moment, self-as-context, valued behavior, etc.)
  ✓ Might feel awkward if used alone or separately without other complimentary approaches
  ✓ Avoid overuse of metaphors
Considerations

• Not done in a confrontational manner, done with humanity, sensitive to the ubiquity of how we all do this, even gentle humor where we all smile and giggle at ourselves

• Again thinking and rationality have uses and benefits, so it is not about throwing those out, just realizing the limits of thinking

• You are using thinking to undermine thinking, using language to weaken language-so at times people can feel confused, out of sorts

• Mindfulness should not be used haphazardly-need to provide context, build skill
References

- *Get out of your mind and into your life: The new acceptance & commitment therapy* by Steven C. Hayes and Spencer Smith (2005, New Harbinger)
- *ACT made simple: An easy-to-read primer on acceptance and commitment therapy* by Russ Harris (2009, New Harbinger)
If I can be of service...

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