

# it's all in your Head

Changing your thoughts will indeed change your behavior.



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**By Dr. Patrick Williams, Ed.D., MCC**

**Dr. Williams: Define Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for our readers and discuss a little of its origins.**

**Dr. Wildflower:** The term Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) was first coined by Arnold Beck in the mid-1970s. Beck theorized that our thoughts were the cause of our feelings and behaviors, rather than feelings, behaviors, and external circumstances being the source of our thoughts.

**In other words, our thinking causes us to feel and act the way we do?**

Yes. This concept, which has been validated by research over the past thirty years, directly contradicts most psychological theories that predate CBT. Prior to Beck and the cognitive therapists, researchers believed that our thoughts about ourselves and the world stemmed directly from circumstances, primarily

**Author's note:** Future Therapy Alliance columns will highlight the theories and techniques from the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, and related professions that are applicable to coaching. Many techniques from various schools of psychotherapy can be applied to the coaching paradigm as long as one is clear they are being utilized for coaching rather than for psychological treatment of mental disorders.

This month's column focuses on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), drawing upon the insights of Leni Wildflower, Ph.D., a faculty member in Organization Development/ Organizational Management, Fielding Graduate University, London. Dr. Wildflower teaches CBT and has participated in research regarding its application to the coaching profession.

in childhood, and the feelings and behaviors that resulted from them. The notion that thoughts directed feelings and behavior—and that changing thoughts could change behavior—was a revolutionary concept.

**Can you speak to the acceptance of CBT in the academic and professional worlds?**

In the years since Beck first published his insights, numerous studies have been conducted in the area of

cognitive therapy. CBT has gained stature among therapists, counselors, and psychiatrists as the preferred method of treatment for a number of psychological disorders, including depression, substance abuse, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

**Which aspects of CBT do you see as applicable to coaching?**

Several aspects of CBT fit particularly well in a coaching model. First, CBT, like most coaching models, is time limited. Second, CBT is designed as a collaborative effort between the therapist and the client. Like coaches, CBT therapists learn what their clients want out of life and then help them achieve those goals. The cognitive therapist's role is to listen, teach, and encourage. The client's role is to express



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concerns, learn, and implement that learning. Third, CBT focuses on current behavior and thoughts; the client's past is not explored extensively. Fourth, like coaching, CBT is structured and directive. It helps clients achieve the goals they set. Fifth, CBT is based on the scientifically supported assumption that most emotional and behavioral reactions are learned. The emphasis in CBT, as in coaching, is on educating the client in new ways of thinking that will help promote new behaviors. And sixth, homework, which is often a feature of coaching models, is a central feature of CBT.

**I can see a tremendous similarity in the methods, albeit for different goals in coaching. It sounds as if basic CBT theory would be powerful addition to coach training.**

Absolutely. The coach just needs to be clear that the methods are not used as therapy, but rather as skill sets and techniques in coaching applications.

**Which aspects of CBT aren't applicable to coaching?**

For the most part, CBT techniques are directly applicable to coaching. The difference is that the overwhelming emphasis in CBT, in both research and practice, has been the treatment of low-functioning individuals. Coaches often work with people who function at a high level. So, for example, the idea of the behavioral experiment, used commonly in CBT, is applicable to coaching, but the experiments themselves might look very different due to the different levels of client functioning in each setting.

**What techniques or strategies from CBT can coaches use even if they are not trained therapists?**

Christine Padesky devised a system for creating behavioral changes in a relatively short period of time through the use of behavioral experiments. According to Padesky, a behavioral experiment might consist of any of the following:

- Observational experiments, such as watching a person who possesses the desired new behavior.
- Graded task assignments, often used with a Likert scale.
- Experiments to test the validity of one's assumptions.
- Interviewing others.
- Devising alternative behavior options.
- Reading to facilitate learning about a different way of behaving.
- Self-observation.

In my opinion, the above tasks might fit easily into a coaching model. They are excellent devices for shifting behavior, whether the client is a cocaine addict or a corporate executive.

**How have you found your training in CBT useful in coaching?**

As I moved from counseling as an occupation to business coaching, I noticed that I encountered individuals who, for one reason or another, needed to make changes in their behavior in a relatively short period of time. My familiarity with CBT techniques allowed me to design programs for managers that produced dramatic behavioral changes. For some managers, the prospect of promotion proved very motivating. Others embraced change because their current job was on the line.

I am a great believer in a saying I once heard from a member of Alcoholics Anonymous: “Act as if.” I told the managers I was coaching that they didn’t need to like their boss or their peers or their employees. They just needed to act as if they liked them. Professional behavior in a business situation demands this. It has been a very freeing concept for some individuals to realize they don’t need to change the essence of who they are.

#### Can you describe a specific example of your coaching work using CBT methods?

The director of training in a company I was doing some work for was assigned to me for coaching by the vice president of human resources. Her staff experienced her as abrasive and unfairly critical. It was not at all clear to me, nor to HR, that she was capable of self-

next staff meeting, walk around the block in the middle of each workday to relax, or e-mail me whenever she felt frustrated. Her homework each week was to put one or more of these experiments into practice.

**I really see how this models the coaching skills taught at respected coach training organizations. You may give homework or experiments to the client, but you are not prescribing from an expert position. You are offering possibilities for the client to consider, right?**

Exactly. I framed these experiments as part of a process of changing outward behavior, of staying calm and being less critical. I avoided putting her under any pressure to have more positive feelings about her staff, but kept validating her outward progress.

By the end of our coaching sessions, she had sig-

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reflection. However, the consequence of her not changing her behavior would have been demotion or termination, so she knew she had to change.

When our coaching sessions began, I listened empathically while she told me all the reasons why she was frustrated—which included conflicts at work and at home—and what caused her to make frequent critical remarks to her staff. My role was not to explore the underlying causes of her behavior, but to help her achieve the goal of treating her staff less critically. I asked her to make a chart on which she could record, day by day, how many times she had criticized members of her staff. This would enable her to both quantify her behavior and record her progress toward her goal.

Meanwhile, we developed a list of behavioral experiments to help her to move herself up the scale. I suggested, for example, that she take a different staff member for coffee every few days, bring donuts to the

nificantly modified her behavior to the extent that her staff was happier, her managers felt more confident about her, and her status in the organization was more secure. This example illustrates that CBT methods can be very effective, particularly with individuals whose behavioral changes are unlikely to come from a process of self-reflection.

**Thank you Leni, for your wisdom and keen understanding of how methods and theory from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy apply to coaching.**

My pleasure. Thanks for the opportunity. •

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