



Module 5

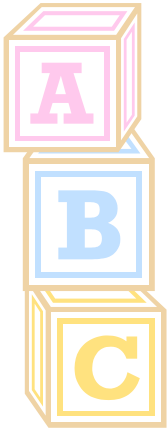
The ABC's of Thinking and Feeling

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Introduction

So we have seen that thinking affects how we feel about things. 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. To do that, let's start by learning about a new set of ABC's.



The “A” part of the ABC is the “**Activating event**”. It is the event or situation that “activates” how we think and feel about something.

The “B” part of the ABC refers to “**Beliefs**”. In the previous module, we talked about how our thoughts and beliefs influence our emotions about a situation. If we think about a situation in different ways it leaves us feeling in different ways.

The “C” part of the ABC refers to “**Consequences**”. As we talked about, one type of consequence is how our beliefs lead to us *feeling* a particular way about a situation. Another consequence of those thoughts might be *physical symptoms* such as heart pounding, or sweating.

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.

Analysing your ABC's

When you're analysing the ABC process, it helps to write it all down. Have you ever noticed that when your thoughts and feelings “swim” around in your head, it can get quite confusing? Writing down what happened helps to clarify your thoughts and feelings, and how they are connected.



The ABC analysis begins with identifying the **activating event**. Simply write down an event or a situation in which you experienced a strong negative emotion, such as, anxiety. Record the situation the same way a video camera might record — just the facts. This may be either an actual event or situation leading to unpleasant feelings, such as “Walking into a room at a party”. It may also be a mental picture or recollection, leading to unpleasant feelings, such as “Remembering the party on Saturday night”. Do not include your thoughts about why the situation occurred, who was responsible and how you felt about it. Just describe the event simply, without any ‘frills.’



Now, because how you respond to a situation can stand out clearly, the next step is to identify the **consequences**. This includes

1. *Your feelings.* Write down the words that best describe your feelings. When you have written down these words, rate the intensity of the emotion from 0 to 100. The higher the number, the more intensely you felt the emotion. **Now, have a look at all those feelings and then choose the feeling that best represents the emotion you actually felt at the time and underline it.**
2. *Your physical symptoms.* Physical symptoms are often quite strong in anxious situations, so record the physical reactions that you notice, such as heart racing, breathlessness, sweating, and so on.
3. *Your actions/behaviour.* You may also want to note any actions that you carried out, for example, if you avoided people, or left the situation.



Now, keeping in mind the situation and the feelings you experienced, identify your **'Beliefs'** or thoughts, expectations, perceptions, and attitudes. Beliefs and thoughts are best described as "self-talk", or what you say to yourself in response to a situation or event. Write these thoughts down. Ask yourself:

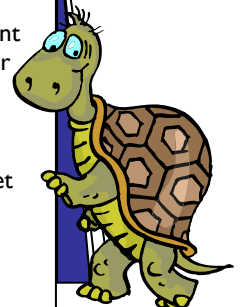
- "What was I thinking of when the event occurred?"
- "What was going through my mind at the time?"

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.

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.

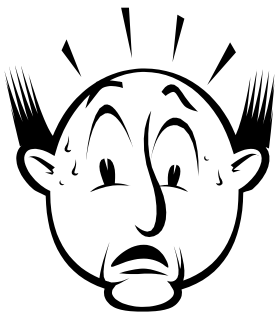
Turtle Tip

Doing an ABC analysis is an excellent way to discover your thoughts and how they influence your feelings. By using it consistently you'll get better at managing your anxiety.



How to Uncover 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 notice that I am anxious"

"...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 emotions. Unhelpful, or disturbed emotions are those that elicit a stronger physiological reaction in your body, such as a tightness in the chest associated with anxiety, or an increase in blood pressure associated with anger. Emotions such as depression, guilt, fear, rage, and anxiety, may also lead to avoidance and destructive behaviours towards yourself and others. They may obstruct appropriate problem solving behaviours, and may cause long term physiological (e.g., hypertension and heart disease) and psychological harm (e.g., psychiatric problems).

Doing the ABC analysis is taking the first step toward learning how to manage your mood (including anxiety) and helping yourself feel better. Here's an example of an ABC analysis recorded on a Thought Diary:

<i>Thought Diary (example)</i>	
<p>A Activating Event</p> <p>This may be either: An actual event or a situation, a thought, a mental picture or recollection.</p> <p><i>At my brother's place and a friend of his drops by. He starts talking to me.</i></p>	<p>B Beliefs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> List all 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?" Find the most distressing (hot) thought and underline it Rate how much you believe this thought between 0 to 100. <p><i>"I wish he wouldn't talk to me"</i></p> <p><i>"He will notice that I look like a 'nervous wreck'"</i></p> <p><i>"I will sound stupid if I talk to him"</i></p> <p>Thought discovery question: "... and what does this mean?"</p> <p><i>"He will think I'm an idiot" (85)</i></p>
<p>C Consequences</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Write down words describing how you feel. Underline the one that is most associated with the activating event. Rate the intensity of those feelings (0 to 100). <p><i><u>Anxious</u> (70)</i></p> <p><i>Irritated (40)</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Jot down any physical sensations you experienced or actions carried out. <p><i>- Heart pounding, sweating, fast breathing</i></p> <p><i>- Avoided eye contact</i></p>	

At the end of this module is a Thought Diary for you to start doing an ABC analysis and recording your unhelpful thoughts. When you're completing the thought diary it may be handy to take another look at those Thought Discovery Questions to try to really pinpoint which unhelpful thoughts are most connected to those strong emotions. Before you do that though, let's clarify the ABC's.

CLARIFYING THE A'S, B'S AND C'S.

When you are first starting to try to break down an anxious experience into the components of A, B, and C, it can be easy to confuse them. We frequently talk about thoughts and feelings as though they are the same sort of experience: "I feel like you're don't pay me enough attention", instead of separating them: "I think that you don't pay me enough attention, and I feel hurt about that". Also, it is quite common for a thought or a memory to be an activating event or situation. For example, thinking about asking your boss for some time off (A) might lead to thoughts about being criticised (B), which then leads to anxious feelings (C). The following exercise can help you to clarify what are activating events, thoughts and emotions.

Is it a Situation, Thought or Emotion?

Situation, Thought or Emotion?

1. Nervous

2. Talking to my friend on the phone

3. Something terrible is going to happen

4. Sitting in a restaurant

5. They think I'm silly

6. Panic

7. I'm sure this won't work out

8. Anxious

9. Shopping for my groceries

10. Fearful

11. Remembering the conversation with my workmate

12. Irritated

13. I shouldn't be treated this way

14. Thinking about the party next week

15. They're all going to laugh at me

Thought Diary

A Activating Event

This may be either: An actual event or situation, a thought, mental picture or recollection.

B Beliefs

1. List all 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.

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).

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

Module Summary

- Assessing the thinking-feeling connection involves analysing the ABC's of thinking and feeling. In this process, A stands for "Activating Event", B stands for "Beliefs" and C stands for "Consequences". The ABC analysis assesses how you feel and what you think in particular situations by using a thought diary, and following these steps:
 - **Activating Event:** The ABC analysis begins with writing down an event or a situation in which you experienced a strong negative emotion, such as, anxiety. Record the situation the same way a video camera might record — just the facts.
 - **Consequences:** This often stands out most clearly, so writing down the consequences happens next. This includes writing down what physical symptoms you experienced, your actions and behaviours in the situation and what emotions/feelings you experienced. This includes underlining and rating the intensity of the emotion that best represents what you felt at the time - the primary emotion.
 - **Beliefs:** Finally, the ABC analysis explores the thoughts that led to these feelings. This includes writing down beliefs and thoughts, such as what was going through your mind at the time. It is important to identify the hot thought, which is the thought most associated with the primary emotion, by underlining it and rating how much you believe that thought.
- Sometimes hot thoughts underly initial thoughts. By asking yourself some thought discovery questions, you can uncover any other unhelpful thoughts. These questions include asking yourself “What is bad about that?” and “What is it that I see happening in this situation?” and “... and that is bad because ...”.
- It is also important to clarify what is an activating event, what is a belief, and what is a consequence, such as feelings.
- Using your thought diary to analyse the ABC's surrounding a social situation in which you have felt anxious is the beginning of learning to change how you feel in those situations.

In the next module we will look more closely at our thought patterns – or what we might call “unhelpful thinking styles”.

Coming

About The Modules

BACKGROUND

This module was created in 2003 by Patrick Kingsep 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 social anxiety is based on the approach that anxiety is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

REFERENCES

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

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“SHY NO LONGER”

This module forms part of:

Kingsep, P., & Nathan, P. (2003). *Shy No Longer*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.