Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Course Manual

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Module 2:

Exploring the theoretical basis of CBT

Objectives

The overarching objective of this module is to examine the theoretical background which underpins CBT, including: the realist model of human functioning; constructivist perspective; Radical constructivist perspective; Information processing model; Cognitive model of cognition; Cognitive behavioural model of emotional distress and the Cognitive triad.

Realist model of human functioning

Held (1995) has presented the argument that CBT is based upon a model of human functioning termed the realist model. The realist model of human functioning presents the theory that events reported by the client actually occur in the real world, irrespective of whether their occurrence is perceived by a human being or even if this perception is inaccurate. When viewing events in this light, it is possible to extend the argument further to encompass the view that the extent to which a client is adjusted has its basis on the accuracy of their perceptions of event. It then stands to argue that the extent to which a client presents as maladjusted is influenced by the level at which the clients perception of the world parallels actual events. When a person is adjusted, they demonstrate not only accurate perceptions of events which occur in the real world, but the ability to cope in a healthy manner with the consequences of these actions (Dobson, 2012).

The realist model is founded in logical positivism and supported by a wealth of quantitative evidence (Mahoney, 1991).

Constructivist perspective

In direct contrast to the realist model of human functioning is the constructivist perspective which explores how the existence of an external reality as that which is presented by the realist model, is based upon a flawed hypothesis which is impossible to empirically assess. To explore this further, one must examine the radical constructivist perspective.

Another distinguishing feature between constructivist and realist approaches is that the constructivist perspective has its empirical basis in qualitative research, encompassing a universal perspective on science which is situated at the individual

level. By doing this, the unique history, culture and other influencing factors of the individual have a central role to play within the development of an evidence-base for the constructivist perspective of CBT.

Most theoretical associations regarding CBT have focused upon the realist perspective (Arnkoff, 1980; Mahoney, 1977). Methods used in CBT practice have reflected a realist approach such as that of techniques which ask the client to recognise bias and distortions in their perspectives of events.

Radical constructivist perspective

Stemming from the constructivist perspective, a radical constructivist approach to CBT holds that the existence of a world outside of the individual does not, in reality, exist. This model posits that reality can hence only be defined as that which is actually perceived and experienced at an individual level; resulting in an experience of reality which is unique to each person. Not only is this experience unique between individuals, but it changes within the individual from moment to moment. No one experience or perception is the same as another. It has been argued (Dobson, 2012) that the constructivist approach to CBT presents that the debate surrounding the existence or nonexistence of an external reality is irrelevant due to the pliability of human perception. This theory presents the argument that humans will never experience a reality as such, as the extent to which we can fully experience external events is constrained by our histories, development, experiences and current mental state.

Language has a unique place within the constructivist perspective and has been examined in the following way:

> *'In a constructivist view, human beings are denied any direct access to an immediate reality beyond language, defined broadly as the entire repertory of symbolic utterances and actions afforded to use by our culture.'* (Neimeyer, 1995: 15)

Whereby, language itself does not illustrate how an individual perceives the world, rather, it acts as a catalyst through which the world can be literally defined and perceived on the basis of this (Dobson, 2012).

In practice, many aspects of CBT mirror what would be perceived as a constructivist approach, for example, where therapists take into account an individual's unique history, experiences and background as influencing factors on their perception of events and experiences:

> *'The cognitive perspective posits…the dual existence of an objective reality and a personal, subjective, phenomenological reality.' (Alford & beck, 1997: 23)*

Overall, it has been determined that no one model is superior to the other with regard to CBT practice, rather, a combination of both approaches leads to the development of an approach which draws from both the unique experiences of an individual and that of the collective experience of reality.
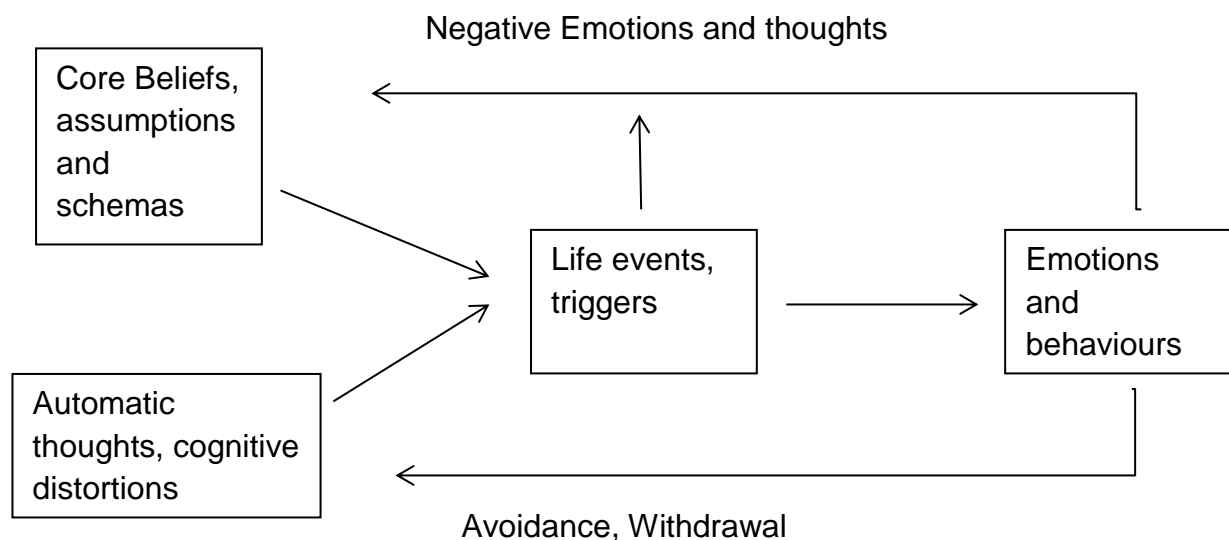
Information processing model

In terms of CBT, the information processing model presents the idea that reality does exist and can be attended to by a person, perceived, learned and accurately remembered (Dobson, 2012). Based upon these theoretical underpinnings, a number of aspects of this model have been developed and will now be discussed in turn.

Cognitive model of cognition

Also referred to as autobiographical or episodic memory, cognitive structures comprise the manner in which long-term memories are stored and maintained defined by the place and time at which they occurred and a person's semantic memory. Semantic memory, where the symbolic representation of a person's learned collective knowledge is stored, differs from autobiographical memory which is unique to the individual and shaped by an individual's own experiences. These cognitive structures are more than a way in which knowledge is stored, but also have a role to play in the ways in which new information is processed prior to storing in the memory; cognitive structures which are already in existence enable a bias which encourages new information to follow the same neural pathways in a self-confirming/self-maintaining manner.

The cognitive processing model consists to two parts; cognitive content; the material which is held in cognitive structures, and cognitive products; which are specific individual cognitions which result from interplay between cognitive structures, content and processes. Similar in some aspects to the information processing model presented previously, the terminology used in this model is more specific to CBT and applicable to practice.

Cognitive behavioural model of emotional distress

Negative Emotions and thoughts

```
┌──────────────┐
│ Core Beliefs,│
│ assumptions  │──────┐
│ and          │      │
│ schemas      │      ▼
└──────────────┘   ┌──────────────┐          ┌──────────────┐
                   │ Life events, │─────────▶│ Emotions     │
                   │ triggers     │          │ and          │
┌──────────────┐   └──────────────┘          │ behaviours   │
│ Automatic    │──────▲                      └──────────────┘
│ thoughts,    │
│ cognitive    │
│ distortions  │
└──────────────┘
```

Avoidance, Withdrawal

Overall, the cognitive-behavioural model of emotional distress (Dobson & Dobson, 2009) (Figure) can be illustrated by the interplay between life events, triggers and the emotions and behaviours of the person in relation to their core beliefs, assumptions and schemas as well as their automatic thoughts and cognitive distortions which may exist, as in the diagram above. These components will be explored in further detail in future modules.

Cognitive triad

The cognitive triad (Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979), in relation to schemas, a person has characteristic beliefs in terms of beliefs about the self, the world and the future. Models of CBT for the treatment of specific disorders such as depression and anxiety have their basis in the cognitive triad, which will be referred to again in greater detail later in this course.

The Cognitive Triad

Self

Beliefs

Future   World
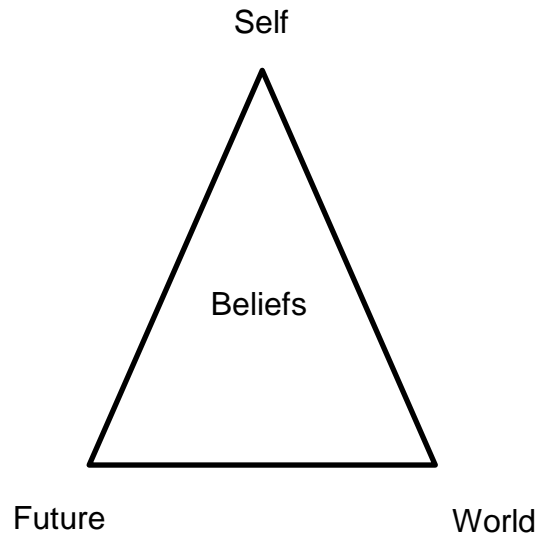
Multiple Choice Questions

1. *Which theorist developed the realist model of human functioning?*
   a) *Held*
   b) *Beck*
   c) *Skinner*

2. *The realist model presents that:*
   a) *Reported events actually occur*
   b) *Reported events are in the clients imagination*
   c) *Events in the clients imagination should be ignored*

3. *The extent to which a client presents is influenced by the relationship between their perception of the world and real life events*
   a) *True*
   b) *False*

4. *The realist model has its basis in*
   a) *Psychoanalysis*
   b) *Logical positivism*
   c) *Behaviourism*

5. *The constructivist model*
   a) *Is the same as the realist model*
   b) *Is fundamentally different to the realist model*

6. *The radical constructivist approach holds that the world outside of the individual exists in true form*
   a) *True*
   b) *False*

7. *The theory that reality exists and can be attended to by a person, perceived and remembered*
   a) *Information processing model*
   b) *Cognitive model of cognition*
   c) *Realist model*

8. *The cognitive-behavioural model of emotional distress has been illustrated by:*
   a) *Dobson and Dobson*
   b) *Skinner*
   c) *Cooper, Heron and Heward*

Bibliography

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