

Coping

Exercise

n/a

Client

Yes

The ABC Model of Helpful Behavior

The ABC model originated from behaviorism, which proposes that behavior can be learned and unlearned based on association, reward, and punishment [1]. ABC stands for Antecedents, Behavior, and Consequences. Cognitive-behavior therapists use the ABC model to analyze why problem behavior occurs by exploring what triggers or reinforces the behavior (the antecedents) and how the reactions to the behavior (the consequences) may maintain the problem [1]. In this way, the therapist and client can come to a shared understanding of the function of the problem behavior to determine what it achieves and how it is rewarded. This information is then used to inform treatment and tailor interventions to the client's particular targets for change [1, 2].

The ABC model can also be applied to the functional analysis of helpful behavior. This tool examines the antecedents and consequences of a client's positive, adaptive behavior to understand how and why this constructive behavior occurred and encourage continued engagement in such (or similarly adaptive) behavior.



Author

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Goal

This tool is designed to help clients reflect on adaptive behavior to build their awareness of the triggers for this behavior (the antecedents) and understand the short and long-term consequences of the behavior.



Advice

- If a client is struggling to identify a desirable behavior, practitioners can suggest they try thinking of something from the following behavior categories: observable behaviors (e.g., exercising, volunteering, resting, reading); thoughts or cognitions the client can report or record (e.g., self-acceptance, self-compassion, letting go, forgiveness, clarity of mind); positive feelings that can be reported and rated (e.g., feeling proud, motivated, calm, joyful, grounded, settled); physiological responses that can be reported and rated (e.g., heart fluttering, energized, relaxed, rested, focused).



- The helpful behavior should be described in concrete terms in step 4, ideally with a specific definition of the behavior to be measured (e.g., “forgave me rather than criticized myself for forgetting my father’s birthday”).



References

1. Kuyken, W., Padesky, C. A., & Dudley, R. (2009). *Collaborative case conceptualization: Working effectively with clients in cognitive-behavioral therapy*. Guilford Press.
2. Tarrier, N., & Calam, R. (2002). New developments in cognitive-behavioral case formulation. Epidemiological, systemic and social context: An integrative approach. *Behavioral and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 30(3), 311-328.

The ABC Model of Helpful Behavior

Introduction

This exercise invites you to reflect on a practical action you took to deal effectively with a personal problem you were facing. You will start by recalling what led you to act in this way in the first place and then what happened as a result of this positive action. The ABC model of behavior (described below) will be used as a template for your reflection.

Step 1: Understand the ABC model of behavior

The ABC model is widely used in psychology to help us understand what led us to do something and whether a particular outcome makes it more or less likely that we would act this way again.

The ABC model comprises three elements: Antecedents, Behavior, and Consequences. Antecedents (A) are all the things that happen before a certain behavior (B) takes place. The consequences (C) are what happened after the behavior.

In the figure below, an example of the model is shown. In this example, the problem you want to understand better is weight gain. Eating a lot of ice cream is the behavior (B). Feeling lonely is the antecedent (A) of the behavior. The consequence (C) of the behavior is feeling bad about oneself.

Fig. 1. An example of the ABC model of behavior

Problem: Weight gain

Antecedents	Behavior	Consequences
I felt lonely	I ate a lot of ice cream	I felt bad about myself

Step 2: Understand the ABC model of helpful behavior

Although the ABC model is mostly used to understand problematic behavior, it can also be used to learn more about positive, helpful behavior. The figure below shows the same example as step 1 using a positive example. Again, weight gain is the problem that you want to understand better. The antecedent, feeling lonely, is also the same. However, rather than looking at unhelpful behavior (eating ice cream), the focus is now on helpful behavior: having a walk with a friend. The consequence of this helpful behavior is feeling good about oneself.

Fig. 2. An example of the ABC model of helpful behavior

Problem: Weight gain

Antecedents	Behavior	Consequences
I felt lonely	I called a friend to have a walk	I felt good about myself

Why is it useful to analyze your helpful behaviors this way? Because once you start to understand what causes you to act helpfully, you can do more of it. Furthermore, by becoming aware of the consequences of your helpful actions, you may become more motivated to engage in the same actions in the future. This can help you create a positive, upward spiral of thinking and feeling.

Step 3: Describe a problem you dealt with recently

Recall a personal problem that you dealt with recently by acting helpfully. In the earlier mentioned example, the problem was weight gain.

Describe your recent personal problem at the top of your ABC diagram in Appendix.

Step 4: Identify positive behavior(s)

Now think about an action that you carried out that contributed to the problem in a positive way. Briefly describe the helpful action in the middle box ('Helpful Behavior') of your ABC diagram in Appendix.

Step 5: Recall triggers of positive behavior

Recall what was happening just before you carried out this helpful behavior. Think back to exactly where you were, who you were with, and what you were doing, thinking, and feeling. In the Antecedents box in Appendix, jot down everything you can think of that preceded the behavior.

Step 6: Explore outcomes of positive behavior

Describe what happened after you carried out this helpful behavior. Think about what happened immediately after (i.e., in the minutes and hours that followed) and what happened later (i.e., in the days/weeks/years that followed). Think about how you felt, what you did next, and what others did or said. Write down both short- and long-term consequences of the positive behavior in the third box (Appendix).



Step 7: Reflection

Take a moment to reflect on the following:

- What did you learn from this exercise?
- What could you do to carry out the helpful action more often?
- Can you think of some other positive actions that would have helped you cope with this problem?

