

***Cognitive
Behavior
Management
#14***

Testing Core Beliefs

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The enclosed techniques and procedures were developed with materials from a workbook of cognitive behavior techniques titled "Thoughts & Feelings and written by Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning. The workbook was published by New Harbinger Publications, Inc in 1997.

Technique #14 Testing Core Beliefs

Clinical Prompt

Step 1: Identifying Core Beliefs

- Thought Journal
- Laddering
- Theme Analysis

Step 2: Assessing the Negative Impact

- Rank the core beliefs by negative impact on his/her work, mood, relationships, health, and ability to enjoy life
- Unless there is a compelling reason not to, begin working on the belief that has the greatest negative impact

Step 3: Finding Testable Assumptions

- Identify rules
- Explore & question rules

Step 4: Generating Catastrophic Predictions

- Identify catastrophic assumptions
- Develop objective consequences that can be tested

Step 5: Selecting Rules to Test

- Easy to set up a test situation.
- Allows you to test the core belief directly.
- Includes a clear prediction of behavioral responses
- Outcome should be relatively immediate
- Relatively low-fear rule to test

Step 6: Testing Your Rules

- Identify one relatively low-risk situation to make test
- Begin Predictions
- Make a contract to break rules
- Script the new behavior
- Test the new behavior and collect data
- Select more situations to test the rule, and repeat

Step 7: Rewriting Core Beliefs

- Keep the Evidence
- Develop new rules.

Forms & Charts

Thought Journal

CBM#01-001

Basic Rules Checklist

CBM#14-001

Rules, Predictions & Evidence Log

CBM#14-002

Technique #14 Testing Core Beliefs

Introduction

Core beliefs are your most basic assumptions about your identity in the world. The most important tend to be beliefs about self, others and future prospects. For instance, they depict you as beautiful or ugly, worthy or unworthy, lovable or unlovable, competent or incompetent and therefore able or unable to achieve. These core beliefs are formed during your childhood and reach a cumulative effect, a personality, by age four or five. Prior to this, the child is data driven, meaning that they take data from experiences and then try to piece together these experiences into some type of coherent understanding of the world. As these understandings coalesce, the child then becomes theory driven and their theory about the way the world works then affect most of their actions.

From these beliefs or concepts the person creates rules to regulate his/her behavior. If the concepts are positive, the rules telling one how to live will be realistic and flexible. The reverse is also true: negative concepts yield negative rules that are restrictive and fear-driven.

Core beliefs and rules are so habitual that they have become nonconscious and go into action in nonconscious ways. They are so fundamental to a person's personality that few people are aware of them. Yet every part of life is dictated by these beliefs and rules. They have enormous influence on automatic or reflex thoughts.

In summary, core beliefs are the foundation of the individual's personality. They largely dictate what you can and cannot do (rules), and how you interpret events in your world (automatic

thoughts).

You can change negative core concepts. This technique identifies, tests and modifies these beliefs based on work by Aaron Beck and Arthur Freeman (1990), Donald Meichenbaur (1988), Jeffrey Young (1990), and Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning (1991).

Symptom Effectiveness

Procedures in this technique can help the client identify his/her core beliefs or concepts, test the veracity of these concepts, and begin the process of changing them. This process can relieve worry, depression, perfectionism, social phobia, low self-esteem, shame, and guilt.

Time for Mastery

It will take eight to twelve weeks for the child to identify, test for validity, and change one core belief and its rules.

Instructions

Your client may be aware of one or two of his/her core beliefs. But many of these beliefs are not conscious. Core beliefs determine to what degree you believe you are worthy, safe, competent, powerful, autonomous, and loved; they also establish your sense of belonging and a basic picture of how you are treated by others. This combination then sets a framework for thinking about future prospects.

In order to develop a baseline to probe for core beliefs, you should have the child keep a ***Thought Journal*** [CBM#01-001] for one week. This will be helpful in identifying clues regarding unknown core beliefs.

The Thought Journal tracks negative core beliefs by recording the child's thoughts whenever s/he experiences negative feelings. At the end of the day, you should have the child remember or visualize those situations where s/he felt anxious, sad, hurt, guilty, and so on. Note to the child the automatic thoughts that occurred at those times and point out how they stimulated the uncomfortable feelings.

Whenever the child can't remember the automatic thoughts, use visualization to help recall details. To visualize, have the child relax his/her muscles and then have him/her picture the event you wish him/her to remember. Encourage the child to see the situation, feel the sadness, anxiety, or anger. In his/her mind, s/he should smell, hear, taste, touch the situation. S/he should then listen carefully to his/her automatic thoughts and write them in the Journal.

Laddering

The laddering procedure uncovers core beliefs by working down, rung by rung, through the meanings of a statement in the Thought Journal until you reach the core belief underpinning the statement. To search for a core belief through laddering, select a statement from the Thought Journal. Now have the child write, "What if this automatic thought is true? What does it mean?"

The child should answer these questions with beliefs about him/herself, not her feelings. Feelings do not lead to core beliefs, but self-statements do. You need to continue to probe attitudes about these situations with the "What does it mean?" question until you have reached the basic core of the child's belief about him/herself, others and future prospects.

Theme Analysis

Theme analysis is another procedure to unearth core beliefs. Review the problematic situations listed in the Thought Journal, searching for a particular theme or common thread running through these situations. Automatic thoughts can also be analyzed for themes. Have the child analyze the Journal to find his/her core beliefs. Look for themes that pervade the problematic situations or thoughts, and write them down.

Step 2: *Assessing the Negative Impact*

If the child has identified two or more core beliefs, have him/her rank the core beliefs by negative impact on his/her work, mood, relationships, health, and ability to enjoy life. Unless there is a compelling reason not to, begin working on the belief that has the greatest negative impact.

Step 3: *Finding Testable Assumptions*

Now that the child has identified a core belief that has a strong negative impact on his/her life, it's time to explore its veracity. Because it is so subjective, the child cannot test the core belief directly. But the child can test the rules for living that derive from your belief.

Identify the Rules for Core Belief

Flowing from each core belief is a set of rules, a behavioral blueprint, for how you need to act in the world to avoid pain and catastrophe. For example, if you have a core belief that you are unworthy, typical rules might include "Never ask for anything; never say no; never get angry at anyone; always be supportive and giving; never make a mistake; never be an inconvenience".

Help the child identify the rules derived from your core beliefs by completing the following exercise.

Exploring Basic Rules

- A. On the top of a sheet of paper have the child write the core belief s/he wishes to explore and question.
- B. Read the ***Basic Rules Checklist*** [CBM#14-001] carefully. For each item ask the child the following questions. Encourage the child to be honest and open.
 - "If this core belief is true, what must you do or not do in this situation?"
 - "What do you really do to cope with your belief?"
 - "How do you protect yourself?"
 - "What do you avoid?"
 - "How are you supposed to act?"
 - "What are your limits?"

On the left-hand side of the paper have the child write his/her rules.

Step 4: *Generating Catastrophic Predictions*

Consider with the child the consequences of breaking each rule. Behind each rule is a catastrophic assumption about how things will turn out if s/he ignores its mandate. Such core belief rules are usually based on assumed catastrophic consequences because the rules developed over time to cope with real emotional or physical danger. However, these rules may no longer be necessary and the consequences for disobeying them may no longer be catastrophic or even unpleasant.

To the right of each rule the child has listed, have him/her write the consequences s/he believes will occur if s/he disregards it. Remind the child to include not only his/her feelings, but objective consequences s/he can observe and test.

Step 5: Selecting Rules to Test

There are five guidelines for selecting rules to test:

1. Choose a rule for which it's easy to set up a test situation.
2. Choose a rule that allows you to test the core belief directly.
3. The rule should include a clear prediction of behavioral responses (yours and others'), not just subjective feelings.
4. The outcome should be relatively immediate.
5. Choose a relatively low-fear rule to test, or find a rule that can be tested in gradients, from slightly risky to very risky.

Step 6: Testing Your Rules

- A. Identify one relatively low-risk situation in which to make your initial test.**
- B. Begin a Predictions Log [CBM#14-002].** Have the child write a specific, behavioral prediction of what the catastrophic outcome to the situation will be, based on his/her core belief.
- C. Make a contract with yourself to break your rule.** Have the child commit to a specific time, place, and situation. If

you are not there for the test, s/he can report the test results.

D. Script the new behavior. Have the child visualize what s/he will do. Have him/her practice an imaginary test with you and/or a friend, or tape-record a dry run of the test. To avoid incurring the very consequences the child wishes to avoid, check that the tone of voice and body language are not cold, frightened, or otherwise negative.

E. Test the new behavior and collect data. In the Predictions Log, have the child write the outcomes of the test. Write which specific parts of his/her predictions occurred and which did not occur. If s/he is uncertain about people's reactions to the test, have him/her ask them some questions like the following:

- Did you have any reaction to what I said?
- I had the impression that you might be feeling _____ when I said _____. Was there anything to that?
- Is it OK with you that I _____?

In the Prediction Log, have the child write the answers to these questions along with other data collected. How did any other people on hand look during the test? What was said? What happened?

F. Select more situations in which to test the rule, and repeat Steps B through E for each test. Choose situations that gradually heighten the risk. As the child obtains more and more positive outcomes to situations that

break the rules, his/her core beliefs will be modified.

Step 7: Rewriting Core Beliefs

After the child has tested his/her rules sufficiently and recorded data in the Log, s/he should rewrite his/her core belief. The child should generalize the information in the log, yet include specific facts that will support the generalization. This becomes the new core belief.

- A. Develop New Rules.** The child should then use these new, more positive core beliefs to write new rules. Write the beliefs on the left side of a page, the child's new rules on the right. Have the child use 'I' rather than 'you', and the present rather than the past tense to compose these rules. Write them as affirmations instead of commands or restrictions. If possible, include predictions with the rules. Here s/he may use the future tense.

When a child writes his/her new rules, these rules may seem to belong to another person, a more positive person than s/he had in the past perceived him/herself to be. Cognitive restructuring of core beliefs can change a person dramatically. For this reason, the child may not be sure of the validity of these new rules. This is OK. S/he will confirm them with an ***Evidence Log*** [CBM#14-003].

- B. Keep an Evidence Log.** To strengthen new core beliefs, have the child keep a log of interactions, events, conversations - anything that will support the new rules and core beliefs. To start the Evidence Log, write on the left side of a page 'What Happened', on the right side, 'What It Means'.

If the child doesn't remember to write in his/her log, try setting an alarm to go off every three hours as a reminder. Have the child keep a notebook or three by five cards in his/her pocket, or wherever else s/he may find convenient. Encourage the child to review the day for contributions to the Evidence Log before going to sleep. It doesn't matter when it happened, if the client remembers a positive experience, they should post it in the Log.

You should encourage the child to actively try to verify and therefore strengthen new beliefs by testing the rules in a specific arena. Select low-risk arenas at first. Perhaps s/he might test the rules just with his/her mother, or just in the morning, or just at school in a classroom with a preferred teacher. Later, when the consequences become less threatening and the client is more comfortable with the new belief, s/he may extend the risk and widen the arena.

Basic Rules Checklist¹

- Dealing with other people's ...
 - Anger
 - Needs/ desires /requests
 - Disappointment/ sadness
 - Withdrawal
 - Praise/support
 - Criticism
- Dealing with mistakes
- Dealing with stress/ problems/ losses
- Risk taking/ trying new things/ challenges
- Conversation
- Expressing your ...
 - Needs
 - Feelings
 - Opinions
 - Pain
 - Hope/wishes/dreams
 - Limits/saying no
- Asking for support/help
- Being ...
 - Alone
 - With strangers
 - With friends
 - With family
- Trusting others
- Making friends
 - Whom to seek
 - How to act
- Finding a sexual partner
 - Whom to seek
 - How to act
- Ongoing romantic relationships
- Sex
- Work/career
- Dealing with children
- Health/illness
- Recreational activities
- Traveling
- Maintaining your environment/self-care

cbt#14-001

¹ Adapted from *Prisoners of Belief* by Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning (1991).