

***Cognitive
Behavior
Technique #17***

Covert Modeling

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.

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Clinical Prompt

Step 1: *Imagery Practice*

- recall the room
- use probe

Step 2: *Write Out Problem Behavior*

Step 3: *Write Out Desired Behavior*

Step 4: *Imagining Context*

Step 5: *Imagining Desired Behavior*

Step 6: *Role Playing*

Step 7: *Preparing Coping Statements*

Step 8: *Performing Desired Behavior in Real Life*

Forms & Charts

Problem Behavior Sequence
Desired Behavior Sequence

CBT#17-001
CBT#17-002

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Covert Modeling

Introduction

Covert modeling is an effective way of altering an existing negative sequence of behavior and thinking - of learning a new pattern. Most people can probably think of a number of behavior patterns that they find unsatisfactory and want to change. A person may want to improve their performance at work, in a personal relationship, or in school. S/he might have fallen into some routine that s/he doesn't like, such as sitting in front of the TV with a can of beer instead of playing with the kids. Or s/he may find him/herself repeatedly coming home tired at the end of a long work day and getting into an argument with his/her spouse. S/he might feel bored and uncommunicative every time s/he goes to visit the in-laws. Some situations may be so anxiety-provoking for the person that s/he avoids them entirely: academic tests, doctor visits, enclosed or crowded rooms, being alone, novelty; speaking before others, and so on.

Likewise, there are probably some new patterns of behavior that a person would like to add to his/her repertoire that might not require any change in existing behavior. S/he may want to learn assertiveness skills to aid in looking for a new job, asking for a raise, or returning to the dating scene after a divorce. Covert modeling can be useful for learning such new behavior patterns.

One of the most important ways people learn to perform a new behavior is to observe and imitate someone else doing it successfully. A young musician may learn to perform on stage by watching his favorite artists on television or at concerts, and then modeling his own act on theirs. In social - skills training, shy individuals often watch videotapes of people who initiate and maintain conversations, and then imitate these videotaped models.

Unfortunately, good models are not always readily available when you need them. In 1971 Joseph Cautela found that you can learn new behavior sequences by imagining people, including yourself, performing the desired behavior successfully. He called his technique *covert modeling*. Covert modeling enables a person to identify, refine, and practice in his/her mind the necessary steps for completing a desired behavior. Once you feel confident imagining yourself doing a particular activity, you can more effectively perform it in real life.

Cautela's classic covert modeling method is to first imagine someone very different from yourself performing the desired behavior. Then you imagine someone similar to yourself, and finally visualize yourself in action. In actual practice, most people skip the dissimilar and similar models and spend all their time imagining themselves.

Cautela stressed the importance of seeing these models struggling with and eventually overcoming difficulties, rather than succeeding perfectly on the first try. This advice has stood the test of time. Recent practitioners have added the practice of analyzing the negative automatic thoughts associated with your unsuccessful behavior, and composing new, more positive thoughts to go with the new behavior.

Symptom Effectiveness

Covert modeling can be used to improve any already existing behavior sequence, or to learn a new behavior sequence that is a major departure from the usual way you act. It is helpful in reducing avoidance behavior associated with phobias and test anxiety, and in increasing assertive behavior. Covert modeling can be used to reduce depression, resentment, and procrastination associated with the failure to perform desired behavior or solve problems adequately

If a child is unable to create clear and detailed mental images, covert modeling will probably be of little help. However, vivid visual images are not absolutely necessary. A child may be able to form strong physical or auditory impressions that will allow you to use this technique with them with success.

Psychologists Thase and Moss found in 1976 that guided behavior rehearsal was more effective than covert modeling in reducing avoidance behavior. Unfortunately, avoidance behavior does not always lend itself to rehearsing in real life, making covert modeling a useful alternative.

Time for Mastery

A child should get results after four fifteen-minute sessions. Personal preference will determine how quickly s/he changes over from covert modeling to practice in real life.

Instructions

Step 1: Imagery Practice

Have the child sit down in a comfortable, quiet place where s/he won't be interrupted for about fifteen minutes. With closed eyes, s/he should scan the body for tension, using a favorite relaxation exercise. After s/he has let go of the tension in the body, s/he should take a few deep breaths, focusing on his/her breathing and allowing him/herself to become more and more relaxed.

With eyes closed, have the child practice recalling what the room s/he is sitting in looks like.

- What are the major furnishings in the room?
- How are they positioned? What are their colors, textures, shapes?
- What are the walls, ceiling, and floor like?
- What are the decorations? What's on the tables or desks?

After imagining the room, have the child open his/her eyes and see how much detail was captured. Repeat this exercise until you are satisfied with your imagery of the room. You may want to try this exercise in a variety of settings to develop the child's ability further.

Next, have the child imagine a nature spot in his/her mind's eye. **Say to him/her:**

- Notice the green trees rustling in the gentle, warm breeze.
- Notice the rough, mottled bark of the trees, and their shining leaves.
- Feel the earth beneath you, paying attention to its color and texture.
- Listen to the water flowing nearby and to the birds as they flit from branch to branch.
- Smell the various scents that fill this natural place.
- Feel the pleasantly warm sun through the trees.
- Allow yourself to fantasize what your eyes, ears, nose, and skin would tell you about the spot in as much detail as possible.
- Then imagine that an old friend walks up to you through the trees and greets you.
- What does he or she look like?
- What does he or she have to say?
- What does the voice sound like?
- What do you have to say?

Once the child has developed some facility in imagining scenes using sight, sound, smell, and feeling, you are ready to begin covert modeling proper. It is not

necessary for the images to be as clear as a motion picture or a tape recording, but they should be as vivid as practice can make them.

Step 2: *Write Out Problem Behavior*

Have the child write out his/her problem behavior ***Problem Behavior Sequence*** [CBT#17-001] and thoughts as a sequence of separate steps. (If s/he is learning an entirely new behavior, skip to Step 3.)

Step 3: *Write Out Desired Behavior*

Have the child write out his/her desired behavior ***Desired Behavior Sequence*** [CBT#17-002] and thoughts as a sequence of separate steps.

Step 4: *Imagining Context*

Have the child practice imagining the context in which the problem behavior occurs. Hold this clear image twice, for fifteen seconds each time.

Step 5: *Imagining Desired Behavior*

Have the child imagine him/herself performing the desired sequence of behavior and thoughts, with difficulty at first, then successfully. Visualize the successful sequence at least twice. An option is to record the desired sequence on tape, leaving space between each step for the child to visualize him/herself performing the new behavior. Then the child can listen with his/her eyes closed, visualizing the desired sequence as often as it takes to feel confident in the ability to actually do it.

Step 6: *Role-Playing*

Have the child role-play his/her desired behavior. This is an optional step. If you believe the child is ready to try the desired behavior in real life, go on to Step 8.

There are several ways to role-play desired behavior. The child can rehearse it in front of a mirror. Or s/he can take both parts of a dialogue by sitting in a chair and saying what s/he would say, shifting to another chair and saying what the other person would say, shifting back to the first chair to respond, and so on. Another method is to rehearse the scene with friends who act out the parts of significant characters while you play yourself. Of course, the client can role play with you.

The important thing is to make the scene as realistic as possible. Finally, s/he can tape-record yourself and practice what you want to say, playing it back to get used to hearing him/herself say assertive things.

Step 7: *Preparing Coping Statements*

Even after practicing the desired behavior and positive thoughts, the child might experience some pessimistic thoughts that could inhibit him/her from applying what s/he has learned to real-life situations. That's why s/he will need to compose a couple of all-purpose coping statements that s/he can memorize or write down on an index card to have handy.

Have the child make up two short coping statements that remind him/her to relax and instruct him/her to follow the plan.

Step 8: *Performing Desired Behavior in Real Life*

Perform the desired behavior sequence in real life.