

***Cognitive
Behavior
Management
#24***

Attribution Training

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Technique #24 Attribution Training

Clinical Prompt

There are three steps to effective use of Attribution:

- it must be applied in a situation where people are thinking about why things are happening,
- the explanation must be an internal attribution, and
- the attribution must convey a positive message.

Instructions: 'Seeding' the culture

- Identify specific areas of attribution difficulty of the individual child.
- Develop scripts for him/her self and significant others
- Implement & monitor
- Evaluate & revise

Instructions: Self Examination

- You may want to have the child fill out the ***Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale [CBM#24-001]*** as the introductory step.
- Develop with the child a list of events and ask the question 'why'?
- people attribute their outcome to one of four causes:
 - Ability is considered a prototype internal stable attribution.
 - Task difficulty is an external stable attribution.
 - Effort is an internal unstable attribution.
 - Luck is an external unstable attribution.
- Controllability is the level of control that a child believes s/he has over the attribution.
- Future behaviors may be influenced depending on three factors:
 - the child's attributions prior to the task
 - the child's perception of outcome, and
 - any subsequent consequences
- Outcomes are perceived as either positive or negative.
- Subsequent consequences are the actions taken by the child as a result of the perceived outcome.
- Assign the ***Attribution Journal [CBM#24-002]***.
- Review the Journal with the child at least every week
- Attribution chains, the way one attribution leads to another.
- Pervasiveness of specific attribution or negative attributions
- Cognitive attribution errors
- Focus on mastery, not competitive performance
- Trends

Use Positive Internal Attributions consistently

Forms & Charts

Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale
Attribution Journal

CBM#24-001
CBM#24-002

Technique #24 Attribution Training

Introduction

The theory about how people explain things is called Attribution Theory. The concept of attributions can be understood as a variety of theories which are interwoven to create a body of knowledge about people and the way in which they make decisions. Human beings have a strong need to understand and explain what is going on in the world. To answer the question 'why'? Attribution relates to the placement of a cause to explain the effects of events and experiences.

As with all other cognitive activities, the information which affects the causes are not simply from the environment, but also from the person's own mental contexts and theories. Thus, such attributions are subject to the same types of errors. Predictably, the errors vary when the causes are placed on the effects of events and experiences of someone else and when they are placed on the effects of events and experiences of yourself.

Because people must explain the world, it opens up some interesting influence possibilities. If you can affect how the child understands and explains what is going on, you might be able to influence how they behave and therefore, potentially change the outcomes and consequences.

Changing personal attributions can occur either through individual self examination or external manipulation. Internal self examination can be focused either on the attributions or on the total cognitive set. External manipulation can occur either within the total culture or with a single significant individual.

Symptom Effectiveness

While individual studies have shown dramatic and almost immediate changes in individuals who experience external manipulation of attributions, there is no clear indication of how quickly absorbed and how long lasting such effects are. The converse aspect, however, is reasonably well documented, that negative external attributions are detrimental and produce long lasting effects. We are additionally aware that even in the best of circumstances, negative external attributions outweigh positive external attributions some four or five to one. Thus it makes eminent good sense to develop the habit of consistent external use of positive internal attributions as well as providing the child with a basis for beginning to understand his/her own thinking in regard to cause and effect.

The effect of attribution on a person's behavior has been demonstrated, but the question of how one can change a child's attributions has not been adequately addressed. It is assumed that optimism is a precursor for change, but such assumptions have not been tested in organized settings.

Time for Mastery

Undetermined

Using attributions effectively

The strongest lesson from Attribution Theory seems to be its simplicity. To achieve obvious and apparently enduring effects, all you have to do is make a few well timed and appropriate statements. There is no great deception or elaborate machinations.

There are three steps to effective use of Attribution:

- it must be applied in a situation where people are thinking about why things are happening,
- the explanation must be an internal attribution, and
- the attribution must convey a positive message.

Attribution theory gives credence to the maxim 'less is more'. The less you do and the more you let the receiver think, then the more change you can get. You just have to make sure that the little things you do lead to internalized attributions. The attribution must become a part of the child's explanation of why things happened and include themselves as the cause.

Thus, an internal attribution is one which internalizes the cause of success and/or failure. Used externally, by others at the appropriate times, we can 'seed' the mental context of the child to consider this internal causation. Used *before* an event, it is called an antecedent internal attribution. For example: "You will do very well in this new school because you are a good student who studies hard", can be proposed to help a student not only succeed at the new school, but to attribute that success to the fact that they are a good student and study hard.

Despite the lack of specifics on how to change a child's explanations, the following procedures are worth contemplation.

Instructions: 'Seeding' the culture

Attribution training happens through interpersonal communication either formally or informally. While it would be nice to have a culture in which everyone understood and used internal attributions at the appropriate times, this is generally not the

case. In fact, research indicates just the opposite. Partially this is because of the fundamental cognitive attribution error in which there is a tendency for the actor to attribute cause to situational or external factors, whereas the observers tend to attribute the same action to disposition or internal factors. Thus adults in the environment are more likely to 'blame' the child for outcomes, particularly negative outcomes, over which the child has no control. In order to assure that positive internal attributions occur on a regular basis from both the Mentor and the significant adults in the child's life, it is important to use a procedure which 'seeds' the culture with positive internal attributions. One such method is to script the environment. In collaboration with the Clinical Supervisor, the Mentor could:

- ***Identify specific areas of attribution difficulty of the individual child.***

While some people have negative attribution traits [external locus of control, stability and uncontrollability] which are pervasive, most will have more or less specific areas of special concern either because it bothers them more than other areas or because it is more debilitating to their functioning. The area can be academic [math or reading], social [people don't like me] or any of an infinite variety of areas.

The identification of such areas can be identified through a ***Functional Cognitive Behavior Assessment*** process in which all significant people in the child's life as well as the child are interviewed [preferably together] in regard to events & experiences, thoughts as stated at the time regarding judgement of success and/or failure and attributions of that outcome. It is important to gather information not only on the child's attributions, but on the attributions of the others who relate to the child as well.

- ***Develop scripts for him/herself and significant others***

Based on the information which has been gathered, the development of scripts which both support the positive internal attributions for the child, but also, because of their use, diminish and perhaps replace the negative attributions of significant others, and provides a 'seed' of different thinking and communicating within the culture as well as the child's mental context, which can have a significant impact upon the child.

- ***Implement & monitor***

Changing our own communication is difficult. More than 95% of what we do is done nonconsciously, and it cannot be otherwise. Thus, it will be important that there be a schedule for use of the scripts which does not limit their use at other times, but ensures that they are said at the appropriate times. This schedule is unlikely to be temporal, and more likely to be situational. Thus, it is not in the schedule to state the script at a certain time during the day, but rather that it must be used every time a specific situation comes up [e.g., before a test].

The Mentor will need to help the significant adults understand that changing communication is difficult and convey his/her monitoring as a support of a desired behavior, rather than as a control.

- ***Evaluate & Revise***

The scripts will obviously need to be revised occasionally simply so that they maintain a freshness to the child and the significant adults. On the other hand, Through continued inquiry, evidence of more successful scripts can be accumulated and strengthened

and weaker scripts abandoned.

The more you are able to influence the culture of the child's home, school and community to use positive internal attributions as a regular part of their interactions, the more likely you are to have an impact on the thoughts, feelings and behavior of the child.

Instructions: Self Examination

A second procedure may be necessary with children with pervasive negative attributions. This process has a relationship to other cognitive restructuring activities and begins with teaching the child the language and concepts of attributions: attribution, locus of control [four causes: effort, ability, level of task difficulty, &/or luck], stability and controllability.

You may want to have the child fill out the ***Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale¹ [CBM#24-001]*** as the introductory step. Depending upon the reading and comprehension skill of the child, you may want to fill it out with the child, reading and explaining each item as necessary.

When you explain the term attribution, it should correlate with the term explanation as a synonym. Attribution is the process through which we seek explanation for, or try to identify the causes of, the behavior of ourselves and others. How does the child explain the outcome?

- I ask why did this happen
- I provide an explanation

¹ You may also use the original Locus of Control Scale developed by Julian Rotter.

- my future depends upon the explanation

We tend to take credit for our successes and disassociate with our failure, blaming external factors. The saying 'a bad workman blames his tools' encapsulates this idea. What does it achieve?

Develop with the child a list of events and ask the question 'why'?

- you fail a test
- your parents argue
- your teacher disciplines you

When you explain what happened, you attribute a cause. People can create new attitudes or beliefs or behaviors depending on the explanations they make.

This leads easily to a discussion of locus of control which refers to the source, internal or external to the learner of the attributed cause.

In both success and failure situations, studies show that people attribute their outcome to one of four causes: effort, ability, level of task difficulty, &/or luck .

Ability and effort are an internal locus, because the child has control over them.

Task difficulty and luck are external, or beyond the child's control. As with anything we have no control over, we feel some sense of helplessness. This illustrates the problems that can arise when people use external things [like rewards and punishments] to influence behavior. The reward or punishment prevents people from making an internal attribution and thus bringing the desired behavior under control. A child may not 'generalize' from the

reward and acquire the internally motivated habit to produce the desired behavior. Instead they will expect some external agent [namely you] to cause their actions. External forces can be effective only if the child believes that s/he **earned** the external factor [reward/punishment] for internal reasons.

People generally view their ability and task difficulty as constant or stable. These are the most difficult, if at all possible, of the four attributions to change.

Effort and luck, however, are viewed as unstable or easily changed.

Controllability is the level of control that a child believes s/he has over the attribution.

Of the four attributions, only effort allows the child any control.

Future behaviors may be influenced depending on three factors:

- the child's attributions prior to the task
- the child's perception of outcome, and
- any subsequent consequences

If the child attributes success to his/her own effort, s/he will be more likely to increase effort on future tasks.

Ability is considered a prototype internal stable attribution.

Task difficulty is an external stable attribution.

Effort is an internal unstable attribution.

Luck is an external unstable attribution.

Attribution research has identified a flaw in assuming that all individuals classify these four attributions in the manner described above. For example, *many people see luck as belonging to the person. Also, for some individuals, effort is a stable feature, and not an unstable attitude.*

The mentor will need to determine the child's conceptualization of these variables to know how to utilize them.

Outcomes are perceived as either positive or negative. These outcome perceptions by the child can produce a variety of emotional reactions such as pride, confidence, embarrassment, shame, guilt or resignation. Obviously, successful outcomes should be desired.

Subsequent consequences are the actions taken by the child as a result of the perceived outcome. Behavioral consequences relate to motivational factors. Attributing failure to stable internal factors can have severe consequences for expectancy beliefs and hence may alter behavior. Clearly, one cannot ignore the degree to which the upper limits on ability do exist, but within those limits there is considerable scope for individual motivation to contribute to performance. If the child must perform a task that s/he feels confident about and perceives the outcome as successful, s/he will be more receptive to similar tasks in the future.

Ideally, the child will attribute outcomes appropriately [e.g., success or failure can be attributed to effort because of its internal causality, instability and controllability characteristics.] This produces a child who is mastery oriented.

Conversely, students who attribute perceived outcomes

inappropriately [i.e., success or failure is attributed to lack of ability, task difficulty or luck], or who avoid responsibility for the outcome consistently may be in danger of learned helplessness. Other characteristics of this phenomenon may include: low self concept, relatively few successes and the inability to attribute their successes internally. Learned helplessness results in the production of the characteristics for the learner to 'give up' in the face of perceived failure.

Discuss thoroughly the child's understanding of these concepts since, as has been stated, people make different assumptions about some of them. At the very least, there must be an agreement on defined terms, even if the child believes differently. It is impossible to communicate effectively if terms mean different things. You may want to use some test methods to assure that the child is understanding the language and concepts. Additionally, this discussion will help you to identify the child's own attribution structure and determine areas of problems to be addressed.

Once you believe the child is comfortable with the language and understands the concepts, you can assign the ***Attribution Journal*** [CBM#24-002].

- ***Talk to the child about expected events*** [math tests, date, etc.] for the next week and ***ask him/her to indicate what s/he believes the outcome of that experience will be.*** [e.g., I will fail, I always fail].
- Have the child ***fill in the first two columns*** of the Journal
- Have the child ***fill in the remaining columns as the events take place.*** The Mentor should indicate that it is the *first* thought about cause that should be placed in the self

cause column.

- The child may not be able to fill in what another person sees as the cause of the outcome, but if others articulate an explanation it should be noted what was said and who said it.
- The child should ***add unexpected events which occur*** [unannounced quiz, interpersonal contact with someone new or an intense and unusual experience] and fill in all the columns except expected outcome.
- ***Review the Journal with the child at least every week*** [you may want to review and talk about the attributions every day as the situations develop].

Several issues are to be addressed.

- attribution chains, the way one attribution leads to another.
- pervasiveness of specific attribution or negative attributions in general.
- cognitive attribution errors: the bias which sees others as acting on internal causes and the self as acting on external causes ['The devil made me do it!']
- focus on mastery, not competitive performance - Performance goals tend to make people compare their outcomes against those of their peers. Learning mastery goals allow the child to compare his/her outcomes with their prior learning thereby increasing motivation, self concept and promoting the selection of more appropriate attributions.
- trends

We tend to be selective about what we perceive, along the lines of our expectations.

Special Considerations

All children can benefit from increased positive internal attributions. As a minimum expectation of any human service, you need to incorporate positive internal attributions into your own communication any children you serve a. Discuss with the Clinical Supervisor the degree of intensity of attribution training that is necessary and of priority to any new child. Never, however, drop below the level of increasing your own use of positive internal attributions.

Locus of Control Scale

Assessment score

Social learning theorists have found that externality is related to psychological maladjustment. Externality has been shown to be related to larger self-ideal discrepancy, a lower self-concept and lower self-acceptance. Internality, on the other hand, has been found to be related to greater academic achievement. The Nowicki-Strickland Scale was designed to assess the construct of locus of control of reinforcement, which is defined as the perception of a connection between one's actions and its consequences. The score is the total number of external responses a subject chooses. For each question numbered below there is a **Y** or **N**. That is the external response for the item. Each time the subject responds to a question in a way that is in agreement with **Y** or **N**, it is considered to be one [01] external response. The score is the total number of agreements. Scores can range from 0 to 40. The higher the score the more external the response.

- | | | | |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Y ___ | 11. Y _____ | 21. Y ___ | 31. Y ___ |
| 2. N ___ | 12. Y _____ | 22. N ___ | 32. N ___ |
| 3. Y ___ | 13. Y _____ | 23. Y ___ | 33. Y _____ |
| 4. N ___ | 14. Y _____ | 24. Y _____ | 34. N ___ |
| 5. Y ___ | 15. N _____ | 25. N _____ | 35. Y _____ |
| 6. N ___ | 16. Y _____ | 26. N _____ | 36. Y ___ |
| 7. Y ___ | 17. Y _____ | 27. Y _____ | 37. Y ___ |
| 8. Y ___ | 18. Y _____ | 28. N ___ | 38. N ___ |
| 9. N ___ | 19. Y _____ | 29. Y ___ | 39. Y ___ |
| 10. Y ___ | 20. N _____ | 30. Y ___ | 40. N ___ |

NOTE: It is preferable to ask these questions in discussion style. Language is ambiguous and many of these questions may have a different meaning or be literally true for the child in question

NAME _____

Date _____

Circle Yes or No

- | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|----|
| 1. | Do you believe that most problems will solve themselves if you don't fool with them? | YES | NO |
| 2. | Do you believe you can stop yourself from catching cold? | YES | NO |
| 3. | Are some people just born lucky? | YES | NO |
| 4. | Most of the time, do you feel that getting good grades means a great deal to you? | YES | NO |
| 5. | Are you often blamed for things that aren't your fault? | YES | NO |
| 6. | Do you believe that if somebody studies hard enough, s/he can pass any subject? | YES | NO |
| 7. | Do you feel that most of the time it doesn't pay to try hard because things never turn out right anyway? | YES | NO |
| 8. | Do you feel that if things start out well in the morning that it is going to be a great day, no matter what you do? | YES | NO |
| 9. | Do you feel that most of the time parents listen to what their children have to say? | YES | NO |
| 10. | Do you believe that wishing can make good things happen? | YES | NO |
| 11. | When you get criticized, does it usually seem it's for no good reason at all? | YES | NO |
| 12. | Most of the time do you find it hard to change a friend's [mind] opinion? | YES | NO |
| 13. | Do you think that cheering, more than luck, helps a team win? | YES | NO |
| 14. | Do you feel that it is nearly impossible to change your parent's mind about anything? | YES | NO |
| 15. | do you believe that your parents should allow you to make most of your own decisions? | YES | NO |
| 16. | Do you feel that when you do something wrong there's very little you can do to make it right? | YES | NO |
| 17. | Do you believe that most people are just born good at sports? | YES | NO |

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NAME _____ Date _____

- | | | | |
|-----|--|-----|----|
| 18. | Are most other people of your age or sex stronger than you? | YES | NO |
| 19. | Do you feel that one of the best ways to handle most problems is just not to think about them? | YES | NO |
| 20. | Do you feel that you have a lot of choice in deciding who your friends are? | YES | NO |
| 21. | When you find a four-leaf clover, do you believe that it might bring good luck? | YES | NO |
| 22. | Do you often feel that whether or not you do your homework had much to do with what kinds of grades you get? | YES | NO |
| 23. | Do you feel that when a person your age is angry at you, there is little you can do to stop him/her? | YES | NO |
| 24. | Have you ever had a good luck charm? | | |
| 25. | Do you believe that whether or not people like you depends on how you act? | YES | NO |
| 26. | Will your parents usually help you if you ask them? | YES | NO |
| 27. | Have you felt that when people were angry at you, it was usually for no reason at all? | YES | NO |
| 28. | Most of the time, do you feel that you can change what might happen tomorrow by what you do today? | YES | NO |
| 29. | Do you believe that when bad things are going to happen they are just going to happen no matter what you try to do to stop them? | YES | NO |
| 30. | Do you think that people can get their own way if they just keep trying? | YES | NO |
| 31. | Most of the time, do you find it useless to try to get your own way at home? | YES | NO |
| 32. | Do you find that when good things happen, they happen because of hard work? | YES | NO |

NAME _____ **Date** _____

- | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|----|
| 33. | Do you feel that when somebody your age wants to be your enemy, there's little you can do to change matters? | YES | NO |
| 34. | Do you feel that it's easy to get friends to do what you want them to do? | YES | NO |
| 35. | Do you usually feel that you have little to say about what you get to eat at home? | YES | NO |
| 36. | Do you feel that when someone doesn't like you there is little you can do about it? | YES | NO |
| 37. | Do you usually feel that it is almost useless to try in school because most other students are just plain smarter than you are? | YES | NO |
| 38. | Are you the kind of person who believes that planning ahead makes things turn out better? | YES | NO |
| 39. | Most of the time, do you feel that you have little to say about what your family decides to do? | YES | NO |
| 40. | Do you think it is better to be smart than to be lucky? | YES | NO |

