

Exercise 8 – The Longitudinal Assessment – How the Problem Developed

This exercise can be used to illustrate how background factors influence our thoughts and behaviours. This includes the interaction between our core beliefs, rules for living, assumptions, negative automatic thoughts (NATs), coping behaviours and emotional reactions. You can read through the following section on “How Negative Thinking Works” to help understand and complete this exercise. This exercise requires objective perspective taking and is best completed with the support of a Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapist.

The exercise is divided into two parts. Part 1 deals with early experiences (usually from childhood) and shows how our beliefs, rules, assumptions and coping strategies are linked together. This is technically known as a Cognitive Schema. Part 2 shows how our thoughts, behaviours, emotions and physical reactions are maintained by difficult situations and in turn reinforce the internal schema itself.

The point of this formulation exercise is to understand how deeply held psychological patterns and coping strategies influence how we react in difficult or challenging situations. This helps us to create a blueprint of the problem. If we can understand and map the factors behind the problem, we can develop new thinking and coping strategies to improve psychological flexibility and choice.

Whilst the exercise is presented in chronological order, in practice it is often easier to start by completing part 2 first and then working back to the background factors and underlying thinking / coping patterns in part 1.

This is a relatively complex process and should be ideally supported by a qualified and experienced CBT specialist.

Part 1

This section of the cognitive behavioural formulation relates to early experiences and details how the different levels of thinking in our cognitive schema initially develop. The schema is like an internal filing cabinet of the mind. As children we start to understand and organise the world around us by opening and labelling files according to our early experiences. We often spend our adult lives putting new material into these old files. Where our childhood experiences were healthy and adaptive, we organise, classify and interpret new experiences in a helpful and adaptive manner. Where earlier life experiences were challenging or disruptive, we tend to file and interpret our new experiences in a negative or disorganised manner.

The idea behind the filing cabinet metaphor is that our underlying beliefs and thinking processes are initially influenced by our early childhood experiences. This can include relationships with parents, the environment we grew up in, the demands or expectations that shaped our attitudes, our school years, social factors and significant early events involving loss or trauma. It's important to emphasise that unhelpful thinking patterns in adulthood are often rooted in ordinary experiences perceived and interpreted through the eyes of a child. It's not just what happened, it's about how we interpreted what happened that often determines how we label our files. For example, if we interpreted the behaviour of an anxious parent as distant, insecure or unloving, then this could lead to a file labelled unwanted, unsafe or rejected. As a child we do not have the intellectual or emotional insight to objectively understand and interpret our early experiences. This can lead to filing errors and a disorganised filing system when it comes to understanding our future experiences.

Whilst negative and traumatic life events can profoundly influence our early schema, unhelpful beliefs about ourselves or how other people view us, are often rooted in the misinterpretation of early or challenging life experiences. The residue of old thinking patterns continues to influence how we see things in the here and now.

So why is this important? If we can understand how our early maladaptive schema were formed, we can find new ways of interpreting old experiences with the power of hindsight and a more objective adult perspective. This process is known as “Cognitive Restructuring” and is best undertaken with the support of a psychologically trained CBT expert. Cognitive restructuring of core beliefs, rules and assumptions involves testing, altering and updating these deeply rooted thinking patterns to find a more realistic, healthy and adaptive way of interpreting the schema. This can include content change in which we challenge and change the content of our thoughts, process change, where we identify and alter distorted thinking patterns and cognitive defusion where we apply a helpful reframe or different perspective about the thought itself.

Note: Where early experiences include traumatic or abusive events, this can lead to deeply rooted and enduring psychological health problems. In these cases, the process of cognitive restructuring is highly specialised and should be supported by a trained Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapist or Psychologist.

Part 2

This section relates to the cycles of thinking and behaviour that keep the problem going. This part of the model illustrates how the factors developed in Part 1 are triggered and maintained by difficult or challenging situations and events. The dotted line between the “Core Beliefs” and “Meaning of Automatic Thoughts” boxes, show how continuing life experiences or daily situations can reinforce the underlying schema on the left side of our model. In this way, negative or unrealistic interpretations continue to be influenced by and in turn reinforce the old filing system.

PART 1

The Problem

Early Experiences

Core Belief(s)

Irrational Rules

Dysfunctional Assumptions

Unhelpful Coping Strategies

PART 2

Difficult Situation

Automatic Thoughts

Meaning of Automatic Thoughts

Emotion

Physical Sensation

Behaviour