

Benchmark Theoretical Approach to Counseling

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I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Introduction

As a future counselor, it is my desire to be guided by a theoretical framework that not only aligns with my personal values and background but is also empirically supported and ethically sound. In *Theory and practice of psychotherapy* (2017), Corey says “It is impossible to separate the techniques you use from your personality...” (p. 4). As such, the techniques that I choose to use should be an extension of the beliefs and values that I hold. Personal preference is just one aspect to consider in choosing a theory- the good of the client and choosing the best existing practices to help them should be a major influencing factor. Choosing a theory that has been studied for its effectiveness and ethicality ensures that counselors are operating under the best possible information (Cook et al., 2017).

Human Nature and Change

My personal belief about human nature and change is that each of the major facets of the human experience- such as feelings, behaviors, relationships, and spirituality, have their own unique impact on individuals and shape their personalities. In order to solve problems and create change in a counseling relationship, each of these influencing factors must be examined for strengths and weaknesses. Once weaknesses have been identified in any area, ones thought patterns concerning these weaknesses must be changed, and a change in thought must be followed through with a change in behavior. While no one theory emphasizes every domain of human experience equally, I found that cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) takes the influence of some of these domains into consideration and aligns best with my own views on personal problem solving. CBT was founded in 1955 by Albert Ellis and Aaron T. Beck, and is based on the assumption that thoughts, actions, and feelings are all mutual, and that a change in one area leads to change in another area (Corey, 2017). The counselor’s role in CBT is to reveal and

dispute the clients' irrational thoughts and beliefs to create change and develop a more rational life way of life.

Personal Background

CBT and My Background

Being in my late twenties has been a very explorative time for me personally. Being able to examine the different facets of my own human experience in school, counseling, and through personal reflection has led me to the conclusion that we are each shaped by many factors in our varying lives. CBT teaches that irrational beliefs are learned from others and actively internalized through self-repetition, causing emotional disturbance (Corey, 2017). This teaching is in line with how I have learned irrational beliefs about myself and reality through the influence of the different factors of my life, particularly adverse childhood experiences and relationships. For example, after my family was robbed when I was young, I irrationally concluded that I was generally unsafe all the time, which caused me to feel intense anxiety. The most effective help that I have received from others has involved being able to identify and unravel false and irrational beliefs that continue to negatively impact my quality of life today.

Personal Objections to CBT

While I have found exploring my childhood experiences to be helpful in therapy, CBT teaches that exploring this facet of the human experience is ineffective for creating real change (Corey, 2017). According to Corey, connecting childhood experiences to the present can be a powerful therapeutic tool. Childhood experiences are also a valuable source in finding the origins of irrational beliefs. CBT has been criticized for its lack of emphasis on exploring feelings and their impact on functioning. I feel that in order to integrate my own worldview with CBT, the role of emotion should not be avoided as all facets of the human experience are important.

Relationship Building and Assessment

Establishing a Therapeutic Relationship

A working therapeutic alliance between the client and the counselor is necessary for an effective application of CBT (Corey, 2017). The counselor acts as a guide, pointing out illogical thinking and helping clients come to understand why they feel and act in the manner that they do. To establish an effective alliance with clients, I would empower them using the central ideas of CBT: listening to them, being sincere about discrepancies, and acknowledging that they have the ability to create positive change in their lives (Corey, 2017, Dollarhide & Lemberger-Truelove, 2019). While sincerity and genuineness are important values espoused by CBT, a measure of tact is also needed due to the challenging nature of CBT (Corey, 2017). I would make sure to pay attention to a client's body language and keep communication open for any signs that they may feel uncomfortable when discussing irrational lines of thinking.

Assessment

The popular view of assessment in counseling is that it should be an ongoing collaborative process that facilitates a better understanding of the client (Corey, 2017). A collaborative approach to assessment keeps the counselor-client relationship open and honest. All dimensions of the client should be assessed, not just the cognitive and behavioral dimensions that are stressed by CBT. In order to assess client needs, a CBT therapist would examine a client's personal history to reveal the origins of their illogical thought processes. In keeping with a genuine and collaborative counselor-client relationship, I might use scaling to assess how well the client feels their needs are being met and how much progress they have made in therapy.

Goal Setting

CBT provides a variety of techniques for setting and supporting client goals. The two main goals of CBT are to reduce emotional disturbance and create a more realistic life philosophy (Corey, 2017). As a CBT therapist, I would work alongside the client to set goals that pertained to these themes. The very nature of CBT as a psychoeducational therapy is supportive of goalsetting as it teaches clients how to fulfill their goals. CBT provides a variety of techniques for supporting client goals such as homework, action plans, and relapse prevention. Homework is especially emphasized in CBT, with the client working outside of sessions to practice skills that will help them reach their goals. I would utilize these techniques to help the client maintain positive thinking and behaviors as well as to prevent negative and irrational thinking and behaviors between sessions.

Limitations

The brief nature of CBT as well as its emphasis on cognition could be limitations to the counselor's ability to create measurable outcomes. CBT emphasizes effectiveness and efficiency, encouraging the counselor to focus only on the client's most urgent problems across a handful of sessions (Corey, 2017). While this makes the theory suitable for environments in which the counselor and client do not have the luxury of time, I believe that it prevents the counselor from being able to fully follow up with the client and see if they are able to maintain their new life philosophies in the long term. It is also extremely difficult to measure a change in thought, and counselors must rely on clients to self-report the changes that they are experiencing in their thought patterns. Clients may report that they are thinking more positively to please the counselor, and it would be difficult to test their claims.

Ethical & Biblical Principles

Ethical Considerations

The American Psychology Association's five ethical principles are nonmaleficence, beneficence, fidelity, justice, and autonomy (Duncan & Geist, 2022). Nonmaleficence, or the concept of doing no harm, is an important principle to keep at the forefront of one's mind when practicing CBT. One of the criticisms of CBT is that it can be confrontational by nature, especially in the process of addressing irrational patterns of thinking (Corey, 2017). Some clients may struggle when confronted, so it is important to be able to reveal a client's irrational thinking to them in a way that does not cause them harm. Another criticism of CBT is the potential for the counselor to impose their own ideas about rational thinking and positive philosophies of life onto the client. It is extremely important that the counselor respects the client's autonomy and ability to create their own goals for ideal thoughts and behavior.

One of the aspects of becoming an ethical, beneficent, counselor is choosing a theoretical orientation that has been empirically supported as best practice. Because of the wide range of studies proving its effectiveness, CBT is an evidence-based practice and is regarded as the most empirically supported therapeutic approach (Dollarhide & Lemberger-Truelove, 2019). CBT has been found to be effective for treating a variety of mental health disorders, physical health problems, and behavioral problems (Nakao et al., 2021).

Religious Integration

As a counselor who identifies as a Christian, I would comply with the American Counseling Association's (2014) code of ethics which states that counselors must avoid imposing personal values onto a client. However, for clients who indicate an interest in integrating their own religious background into therapy, religious beliefs can be incorporated into the framework of CBT (Pearce, et al., 2015). Religion is a resource that is widely used by those suffering from mental and physical illness and has the potential to create even more

effective outcomes when integrated into therapy. To integrate the Bible into my own practice of CBT, I would work with the client to avoid irrational lines of thinking that went against the truths stated in the Bible. For example, a client struggling with negative self-image could be given the homework of memorizing Psalm 139:14, which states that we are fearfully and wonderfully made by God (English standard version Bible, 2022). When the client starts having negative thoughts about their body, they could repeat that verse in their mind until the concept of being a wonderful creation comes more naturally to them.

Integrating CBT with The Bible

CBT's principle of changing negative cognitions to effect changes in behavior draws parallels to the Biblical concepts of sin and salvation (Corey, 2017). In the same way that unlearning irrational beliefs can set us free from unwanted behavior, Romans 8:2 tells us that living by God's laws can set us free from sin and death (English standard version Bible, 2022). CBT is a good fit for my Christian background as it does not assume that people think logically or behave well by nature (Corey, 2017). Negative or unwanted behavior, called sin in the Bible, is something that must be identified and changed- a principle espoused by both CBT and Christianity.

Conclusion

Having considered my personal background and values as well as the current best practices in counseling, CBT presents itself as the best theoretical framework for me to be guided by. CBT aligns with my personal view of human nature and how we are shaped, both positively and negatively, by our thoughts, behaviors, and feelings (Corey, 2017). The various techniques of CBT would give me the tools to help establish a relationship with clients, help them set goals, and assess their progress towards those goals. In order to be an ethical Christian practitioner of

CBT, I would need to keep the ethical principles of nonmaleficence and autonomy at the forefront of my practice to avoid making the client uncomfortable or imposing my own values onto them. Overall, CBT is the theory that best aligns with my personality alongside being an ethically sound, research-based practice.

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