The CBC Approach to Stress Management Coaching.



“promoting excellence & ethics in coaching”

**TURN STRESS INTO OPPORTUNITY:  THE CBC APPROACH TO STRESS MANAGEMENT COACHING**

*By Laurel Alexander, author, tutor and founder of Wellness Professionals at Work*

**USING STRESS AS AN OPPORTUNITY**

What do we mean by the term “stress” in relation to the human condition?  We could say that a certain amount of tension gives drive to our motivation while too much stress leads to being overstretched and the potential for snapping.

We can get so immersed in life that we are sometimes blind to the harm excess stress is having on our physical and psychological health.  What we are looking for is just enough stress to give life zest.   Therefore we need to recognise when we are reaching our stress threshold and at such times, how we can use stress as an opportunity for positive change.

**Change**

In my book How to Incorporate Wellness Coaching into Your Therapeutic Practice, I write about the influence of change on our stress levels.  The more major life changes that have occurred in your life during the past couple of years, the greater the chances of your becoming physically or emotionally ill (Holmes & Rahe, 1967).   Alvin Toffler (1970) wrote a best seller, *Future Shock*which sets out the idea that technology was producing such rapid change that people felt unable to keep up with the accelerating flow of information and choices. On the other hand, an equal amount of stress or frustration is caused by changes being made too slowly rather than too fast e.g. racial prejudice or changes we'd like to make at work but can't (Siegelman 1983). Siegelman also believes that there is an opposite force to the resistance to change.   It is natural to seek change, to master new challenges, explore the unknown and to test ourselves. Siegelman says "mastering the anxiety of venturing promotes new levels of growth."

**Stress and health**

Chronic stress can be the result of many repeated cycles of acute stress such as a difficult job situation or chronic disease. Threat on a long-term basis, sends the message to our systems that our survival mechanisms of fight or flight need to be continually activated.

Many functions in the body turn off because they are not needed in the fight or flight responses while other functions are activated to higher than normal levels. However, when we are not in danger, continued activation of the stress response is not necessary. The result of the stress response causing imbalances throughout normally functioning systems in the body and when we experience such responses, especially over an extended period, we need to make some changes to redress the balance.

We know that the mind has a powerful impact on the body. Individuals who are chronically pessimistic, angry or  anxious tend to be more susceptible to stress and illness. Similarly, almost every medical illness affects people psychologically as well as physically (Hales, 2003).

Stress hormones impact on the immune system, suppressing it  and making the body less capable of fighting disease and infection.  The effects of a compromised immune system include everything from low level infections, to the rate of wound healing, and even a link with breast cancer development. In research on women with metastatic breast cancer, psychiatrist David Spiegel found that stress hormones played a role in the progression of breast cancer (1989). The average survival time of women with normal cortisol patterns was significantly longer than that of women whose cortisol levels remained high throughout the day (an indicator of stress).

In addition, these conditions have been shown to have a stress component;  abnormal heartbeat, alcoholism, asthma,  chronic fatigue, chronic tension headaches, heart disease, depression, erectile dysfunction, skin disorders, high blood pressure, fertility, fibromyalgia, insomnia, IBS, menstrual difficulties, MS and ulcerative colitis.

**COGNITIVE BEHAVIORIAL COACHING AS A STRESS MANAGEMENT TOOL**

A key stress management skill is cognitive behavioral coaching (CBC) which is derived from cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).  CBT evolved out of Joseph Wolpe’s behaviour therapy (1950s), which combined with elements of Aaron Beck’s Cognitive Therapy, Albert Ellis’ Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy, and a number of other influences from the cognitive approaches to psychotherapy, appeared in the 1950s and 1960s.

Cognitive behavioral approaches emphasize that how we react to events is largely determined by our views of them, not by the events themselves which is the view of modern stress management.  Through re-evaluating unhelpful mindsets, we can implement alternative viewpoints that may be more effective in aiding problem-solving and changing behaviour.   CBC is founded on the understanding that feelings and behaviours are directly affected by the way a person thinks.  These faulty patterns of thinking gives rise to emotional distress and by altering these unrealistic thought patterns and changing inappropriate behaviours, clients can reduce emotional distress.

CBC seeks, through collaborative activity, to facilitate a time limited, goal-directed and present focused process, to help clients reach their own solutions in order to build stress-resilience. CBC can help clients alter how they think (cognitive) and what they do (behaviour).

**An example**

There are helpful and unhelpful ways of reacting to most situations, depending on how you think about them.  Imagine you’ve been diagnosed as a pre-diabetic.

*Unhelpful                                           Helpful*

*Thoughts*                   My body’s out of control.                I need to know what I can do to help myself.

*Feelings*                     Fearful.  Angry.                               Curious.

*Physical*                     Hot.   Breathing fast.                      Calm breathing.

*Behaviour*                  Not listening.                                  Questioning and listening.

The same situation has led to two different results. How you think, has affected how you feltand what you did.  The unhelpful route leads to negativity.  The helpful route is potentially more productive.

**Using the ABC model**

Albert Ellis developed the ABC model which describes the sequence of events that ultimately lead to our experienced feelings. He recommends that people break down their experience into these three areas in order to discover if irrational beliefs are present:

*“A"  is the activating event:*Activating events are the experiences we encounter. These events are described in factual, objective terms e.g. I stay late at work until 7pm on most weekdays.

*"B" is the belief:*This is where you access faulty thinking, images and beliefs.

*"C" is the consequent emotions:*The resulting feelings experienced as a result of your interpretation of the event.

For example, imagine two people with IBS, one sinks into depression and apathy while the other explores how his stress levels influence his condition. If our emotions are a product of experience only, then why did only one become depressed and remain inactive? If emotions were caused solely by events then both would have resorted to depression. Albert Ellis would argue that the two people appraised the provocation in different ways. Consider four possible emotional outcomes of the same event:

**ACTIVATING EVENT                          BELIEF                                               CONSEQUENT EMOTIONS**

I have IBS                                         I’m a loser                                            Depression

I have IBS                                         My body has let me down                       Frustration.  Anger

I have IBS                                         No one can help me                               Anxiety, panic

I have IBS                                         I want to understand my stress              Curiousity.  Hopefulness                                                                           triggers so I can improve my health.

What this illustration suggests is that our emotions are largely dependent on how we evaluate ourselves via our underlying beliefs related to an event. We create an understanding of ourselves and the world around us based on our experience and learned responses. Therefore we are each going to differ with regard to the styles of thinking we engage with.

When using CBC in stress management coaching, clients need to learn how to pay attention to automatic thoughts, recognize those which are faulty and reframe realistic interpretations along with changing inappropriate behaviours.

**The 8-step process to using CBC in stress management coaching**

Presenting clients with a problem-solving model  helps.   B. Wasik (1984) proposed a 7-step problem solving sequence and accompanying questions that people can ask themselves at each step:

1          Problem identification                                       What is the concern?

2          Goal selection                                                   What do I want?

3          Generation of alternatives                                 What can I do?

4          Consideration of consequences                        What might happen?

5          Decision-making                                               What is my decision?

6          Implementation                                                Now do it!

7          Evaluation                                                        Did it work?

I’ve taken this 7-step sequence of and adapted it to an 8-step CBC sequence for stress management coaching:

1          Problem Identification                                   What is the real problem here?

2          The CBC Choice                                           What is the CBC process?  Is CBC the right                                                                                                             methodology for me to use with my  current                                                                                                           problem?

3          Goal Selection                                What do I want my stress management goal to  be                                                                                                  based on my problem?

What do I want as  opposed to what do I not want?

4    Exploring & Challenging Faulty Thinking       What are my faulty thoughts?

How can I  challenge and dispute my faulty thought  processes?

5          Choices & Consequences                   What might be the consequences of staying  with                                                                    faulty thinking?   What choices do I have?                                                                             What might happen if I choose this or that?

6          Decision-Making & Action Planning               What is my decision?

How am I going  to implement it?

7          Implementation                                           It happens.

8          Evaluation                                                   How did it work for me?

How do I feel as a  result of this change?  What else

might I need  to change?

A client will fully engage in stress management coaching when they are motivated.  Sometimes the motivations are blurred and therefore hold back the client from getting the best from the coaching process.  CBC can help uncover beliefs and motivations and where appropriate, reframe them so that positive change can occur.