

A background image showing two hands held up, palms facing each other, forming a triangular shape. The hands are positioned at the top corners of the page, with the fingers pointing towards the center. The background is a light, neutral color.

What is the Cognitive Triangle and How is it Used?

POWER OF THE TRIANGLE

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or CBT, is a time-honored and well-researched method of assessing and treating mental health problems. It is based on the works of Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis in the 1960s. They theorized and laid emphasis on the need for a change of attitude, which in turn affects our actions.

CBT is a combination of Cognitive therapy and behavioral therapy. Cognitive therapy shows that how we think of people controls how we treat them. Behavioral therapy shows that behavior is affected by consequences. All this brings us to the concept of the cognitive triangle.

COVERED IN THIS PAPER:

What is the Cognitive Triangle?

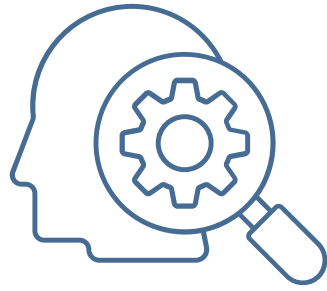
Sides of the Triangle: Thoughts

Sides of the Triangle: Feelings and Behavior

How the Triangle Relates to CBT

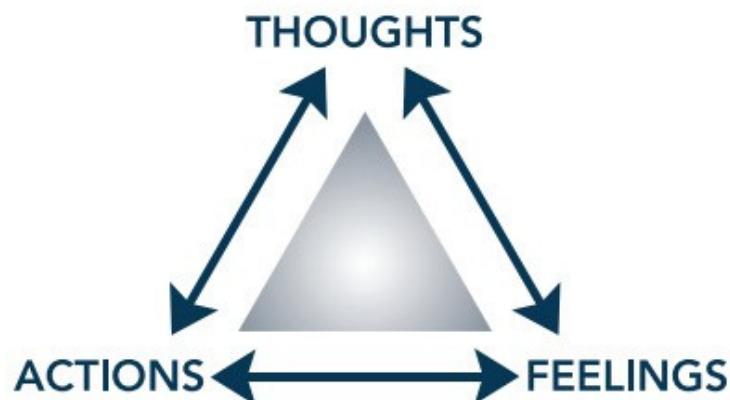


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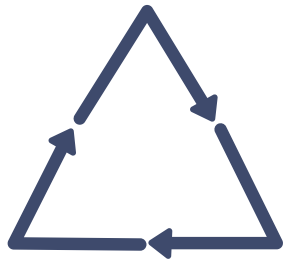
WHAT IS THE COGNITIVE TRIANGLE?

The cognitive triangle is a diagram that shows the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behavior. It indicates how our thoughts change the way we feel which in turn has an impact on our actions which affect our thoughts and the cycle goes on. This pattern cannot be broken without intervention.



The cognitive triangle is one of the most popular and effective methods that cognitive behavioral therapists use to treat mental health disorders. It is used to support patients with anxiety, depression, and other day-to-day stressors.

The point of the cognitive triangle is to shed light on the connection between feelings, thoughts, and actions. Knowing how these three are connected helps to change some of our behaviors and thoughts.



SIDES OF THE TRIANGLE: THOUGHTS

People often have fleeting thoughts that come and go every day, some of which linger more than others. Thoughts of self-criticism tend to be frequent and without awareness of how often they occur, it is impossible to avoid them. Therapy highlights how these thoughts have an impact on your emotions.

An example of recurrent thoughts is when you get your first child. With all the evil in the world, it is natural to have thoughts of impending doom towards your baby. These thoughts will always be there even when the child becomes an adult.

There are several sources of recurrent thoughts:

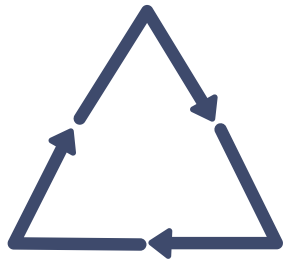
All-Or-Nothing Thinking: You see things as either they are or they are not. In the example, you may think that if your child is outside then something bad will definitely happen to them.

Overgeneralization: You take one negative event and extrapolate it as the way things will be. For instance, if one child scrapes the knee while playing outside, you feel like whenever your child plays outside they will definitely get injured.

Mental Filter: You pick one negative incident and fixate on it until it affects how you view things. Unlike overgeneralization, if your child gets injured while playing, you automatically dwell on this event thinking that whenever your kid plays outside, they will get hurt.

Disqualifying The Positive: you leave out all the positive incidents saying that they don't matter. In the example that we are using, if your child has been playing outside and has never gotten hurt, you ignore all that and focus on the one time they got injured.

Jumping To Conclusions: you get negative thoughts by making assumptions.



SIDES OF THE TRIANGLE: THOUGHTS

Mind Reading: you interpret peoples' situations based on assumptions. For instance, if your child comes home upset, you assume that they have been injured while playing.

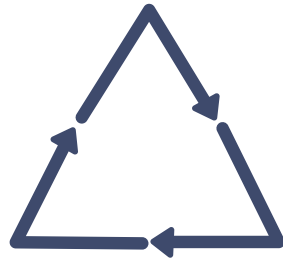
Fortune Telling: You predict that things will go wrong, and you feel convinced that your prediction is a fact.

Magnification (Catastrophizing) or Minimization: You exaggerate the importance of things or reduce the significance of others. In the example, you may think that someone else was an overprotective parent and their child stayed safe, or reduce the significance of independent children who are thriving. This is also called the binocular trick

Emotional Reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions show the way things really are. For example, "I am scared that something bad will happen to my child and therefore something bad will happen".

Labeling and Mislabeling: This is inflated overgeneralization. It is fueled by emotions. It can cause you to describe situations in an exaggerated way and inflate events more than they actually are.

Personalization: You see yourself as the reason for bad things happening around you. For instance, if one of your children gets hurt, you blame yourself and it fosters overprotective and fearful thoughts in you.



SIDES OF THE TRIANGLE: FEELINGS AND BEHAVIORS

Feelings

Feelings differ from thoughts in that they can be described by one word. Taking the example above, you can have a thought like 'I need to protect my child from all the dangers out there. The emotion associated with this thought is simple – fear. Emotions are sometimes easily identifiable in therapy, and they influence how you act.

Behavior

Actions are influenced by both thoughts and feelings. In the example, a related action would be to become an overprotective or helicopter parent, monitoring your child's every move.



HOW THE TRIANGLE RELATES TO CBT

Cognitive behavioral therapists use the cognitive triangle to show clients how thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can be influenced to change the situations around them. This technique can help with mental health issues like anxiety or depression.

One way to help patients stay on top of their thoughts is to have them write down all the negative ones that come in their day and categorize them according to the sides of the triangle. This will help them recognize thought patterns and triggers, and it will help them start to avoid these patterns.

Emotions may seem easy to identify and name but oftentimes, there are underlying emotions connected to the ones felt in the moment. An emotion like anger over, say, a child getting hurt, could be caused by the fear of losing a child. This will produce a totally different reaction and uncovering the underlying emotion is key in battling mental health issues.

When your patients uncover underlying emotions and change their thoughts, their actions follow suit. As a therapist, you can also help your patient influence their thoughts and feelings by coaching them on behavioral changes.



CONCLUSION

The cognitive triangle is a fantastic technique for organizing your approach to cognitive behavioral therapy with your clients.

For more resources on CBT techniques and worksheets, visit KASA's Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Resource Library.

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