

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND



HOW TO USE CBT TO DEVELOP SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SKILLS

The underlying concept behind Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is that our thoughts and interpretations play a fundamental role in our feelings and behaviours. CBT helps to identify negative and unrealistic thought patterns and uses a wide range of techniques to help participants to test them and adjust them, if necessary. CBT can be used individually and in groups.

As a first step, you need to identify situations that cause stress/negative feelings and analyse them with the help of the following questions:

- What happened exactly (who did what, who said what, etc)?
- What kind of emotions emerged, and in what intensity? What kind of physical symptoms you had (stomach ache, shivering, etc), if any?
- How did you interpret the situation? What thoughts rushed through your mind? What did the situation say about you/others, what was the worst about it?
- How did you react? What did you do?

At this stage, the goal is to spot the difficult situations and try to distinguish the “objective” elements of the story (who said what, who did what, etc) from your subjective experiences (emotions, sensations) and interpretations. This can be a challenging task.

Next, after you managed to identify your interpretations (that are usually automatic, negative thoughts about the situation, about yourself, about others), you can start to challenge them, test them, see how realistic, well-founded they are.

You might notice that they involve so called “cognitive distortions” (or cognitive biases). These are exaggerated/irrational thinking patterns that lead to unrealistic conclusions and negative feelings. Here are some of the most frequent cognitive distortions – which CBT targets and tries to modify:

- “Mental filtering”: a person focuses only on the negative aspects of a situation and disregards anything positive.
- “Black and White thinking”: a person evaluates a situation or the self in a “all or nothing” manner, in extreme terms.
- “Catastrophizing”: a person gives a high probability to the worst possible outcome.
- “Jumping to conclusions”: a person predicts an outcome with great confidence based on very little information.
- “Personalization”: a person thinks that everything others say or do is directly targeted at them, are personal reactions to them. They might also blame themselves for outcomes that are outside their control.
- “Shoulds and have-tos”: a person has a very rigid idea about how they and the others should behave/react. If others break these rules the person gets upset, if he or she cannot live up to the rules, they feel guilty, depressed.
- “Emotional reasoning”: a person thinks that if they feel something, then it is definitely true. “If I feel I am dumb, I must be dumb”.

You can test your automatic negative interpretations by using probing questions, such as:

- How did I come to this conclusion/interpretation?
- What are the evidences that support it?
- Are there evidences against it? If so, what are they?
- Can I imagine that there could be alternative interpretations (for example others would have interpreted the situation differently)? If so, what would they be?

The goal is not to dismiss someone’s interpretations or ask them to think positively, nor to look at the bright side of life. Instead, we ask you to identify your interpretations and then to evaluate them critically, to test how realistic/probable they are. By the end of the process, you might modify your original interpretation to a great or maybe only to a little extent, based on your own insights gained during this process (which is called “cognitive restructuring”). When interpretations become less extreme, less negative, your negative feelings usually become less intense too and you will be able to act/react in new ways in future similar situations.

How can CBT be used/incorporated in training that develops SEL skills?

- By helping participants to be aware of their sensitive points – asking them to collect and think about situations where they have a disproportionate, intense reaction to something according to themselves or others.
- By explaining how thoughts can impact emotions and reactions.
- By creating situations that demonstrate the subjective nature of interpretations (theatre techniques can be used here as well).

- By including a series of questions in debriefings such as:
 - How did you feel? How intense were your feelings?
 - What thoughts did you have during the activity – about the situation, about yourself, about others?
 - After everyone shares their thoughts/feelings: are you surprised to hear others' interpretations of this activity? If so, how and why?
 - Would you feel differently if you interpreted the situation in a new way?
 - Do you think that if your interpretation changed, your reactions, and chosen behaviours would change as well? If so, how?