

Session overview

The aim of this session is to explore how our behaviours are influenced by our environment, our thoughts and feelings and our motivation.

There are three main topics in this session. The behaviour change approach emphasised in this session is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This theory explains that behaviours don't happen in isolation. They're caused by what happens in the moments immediately before and after. What happens before a behaviour is known as an antecedent and what happens after a behaviour is known as a consequence. This relationship can be explained using the ABC model, as shown in the figure below. By making changes to antecedents and consequences through principles of stimulus control and contingency management, people are encouraged to think about why they do the things they do and what helps them to maintain or change those behaviours.



This session focuses less on communicating the theory behind the ABC model and more on how to apply it to everyday life. Adults are responsible for driving change in their lives. When working with families, adults in the family are critical for setting up conditions for behaviour change within the home environment and for modelling healthy behaviours. As children enter adolescence and begin to develop independence, their parents and carers may become less involved, however this is likely to be different for every family.

A note on extrinsic consequences

This session encourages participants to engage in healthy behaviours because they enjoy them and/or find them satisfying (intrinsic consequence), rather than the desire for an extrinsic consequence such as a tangible reward or praise. To do this, we encourage people to find ways to make healthy habits more enjoyable. We take this approach because it will result in more long term, sustainable behaviour change.

There is evidence to suggest that extrinsic consequences are beneficial for changing more stubborn behaviours. However, we are also mindful that sometimes extrinsic consequences for food or activity behaviour change can be experienced as a form of pressure. According to Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility in Feeding, a pressure free environment is the key to creating healthy eating and activity behaviours.

We understand that some participants may choose to incorporate extrinsic consequences in their own environments and goal setting. So, guidance is provided to do so in a helpful way that avoids pressure.

1 Our environment

Teaching objective: To explore how our environment can influence the way we behave, and how we set up our environment to help us form healthy habits.

By the end of this topic, participants will understand:

- How our environment can influence the way we behave.
- How to make changes to our environment to help us form healthy eating habits.
- How to make changes to our environment to help us form healthy activity habits.

Summary of key learnings

- Participants identify factors in their environment (external antecedents) that influence their behaviour and health habits. This includes home, school, childcare, or work environment.
- Participants are provided with strategies to modify their environment to add things that prompt healthy behaviours and reduce or remove things that prompt unhealthy behaviours.
- Participants are always encouraged to find a replacement when removing or reducing something from their environment. For example, if removing soft drink from the fridge participants are encouraged to replace it with a jug of water instead.

2 Thoughts and feelings

Teaching objective: To explore how our thoughts and feelings influence the way we behave, and ways to manage them to help us form healthy habits.

By the end of this topic, participants will understand:

- How our thoughts and feelings influence the way we behave.
- Ways we can use helpful thoughts and feelings to form healthy habits.
- Ways we can lessen the effects of unhelpful thoughts and feelings on forming healthy habits.

Summary of key learnings

- Participants learn the difference between thoughts and feelings (internal antecedents) by explaining that thoughts occur in the brain as internal dialogue while feelings manifest in the body. Understanding this connection sets the stage for comprehending how thoughts and feelings impact behaviour.
- Participants learn that thoughts and feelings can be helpful (they prompt healthy behaviours) or unhelpful (prompt undesirable health behaviours).
- Participants also learn to respond to unhelpful thoughts or feelings in a way that moves them toward the behaviours they are hoping to achieve through acceptance, problem solving and self-reflection techniques.

3 Our motivation

Teaching objective: To explore how internal and external motivation can influence the way we behave and help us to form healthy habits.

By the end of this topic, participants will understand:

- How to find internal motivation to form healthy habits.
- When and how to use praise to motivate healthy habits.
- When and how to use rewards to motivate healthy habits.

Summary of key learnings

- Participants learn to differentiate between internal motivation (intrinsic consequence driven by personal interest or enjoyment) and external motivation (extrinsic consequence driven by external factors or tangible rewards).

- Participants are encouraged to try to engage in healthy behaviours because they enjoy them and/or find it satisfying to do so (internal motivation or intrinsic consequence).
- Participants are provided with guidance for using praise as an external motivator to avoid creating pressure, for example by focusing on the experience and effort rather than the outcome or achievement.
- They are provided with guidance for using tangible rewards as an external motivator to avoid creating pressure, for example by avoiding using food as a reward as it may create a pattern of comfort eating.

4 Goal setting

Below is a list of suggested SMART goals that participants may choose to work on after completing this session. They are also provided as a list for participants in the handouts.

SMART Goal suggestions

- Identify something in your environment that makes it hard to be active and swap it for something more helpful.
- Identify something in your environment that makes it hard to eat healthily and swap it for something more helpful.
- Think about a local activity or fitness group that you might like to join and find out some more information.
- Brainstorm a list of indoor activities to do when the weather is bad, then do an activity from this list three times this week.
- Brainstorm a list of equipment free activities to do, then do an activity from this list three times this week.
- Pack activewear and runners with you and do 30 minutes of activity on your way home, twice this week.
- Remove or reduce a processed food or drink from the pantry and replace it with a healthier alternative this week.
- Write down a shopping list before going to the shops at least once this week.
- Cook and prepare meals at home three times this week.
- Do something active (e.g. go for a walk) next time you are experiencing an unhelpful thought or feeling, once this week.
- Spend 5 minutes twice this week writing down helpful and unhelpful thoughts and feelings that you experienced.
- Choose to do something active that makes you feel good, rather than an activity that is 'good for you' once this week.
- Next time you experience an unhelpful thought or feeling, try to respond in a way that moves you towards your goals.

Key references:

Leahy, R. (2017). *Cognitive Therapy Techniques: A Practitioner's Guide 2ed*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.