

# BECK

## COGNITIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY

### Responses to your Questions - CT-R Webinar Turning Stress into Valued Action

<https://beckinstitute.org/ctr-webinar-series/>

We appreciate your terrific questions, suggestions, and participation during the May 1<sup>st</sup> webinar — Turning Stress into Valued Action! Below are our answers to questions we did not get to during the session. We also include suggestions made by webinar attendees for activities to try. We have grouped answers and suggestions by theme. Please feel free to write us! *Ellen Inverso & Paul Grant*

#### **1. Could I receive the copy of "Key Take Away Points" slide if possible?**

For sure! Here are the “Turning Stress into Valued Action” take away points:

- Stress shows us where our values are located
- We want to channel the energy onto actions that promote our values
- Imagery, mind-body skills, such as grounding and progressive muscle relaxation, and engaging in interests can reduce the intensity of negative emotions and allow us to refocus
- Valued action increases control and can make a difference for us and others – and it doesn’t have to be elaborate
- Take time to notice the meaningful things you do - these conclusions can buffer us against anxiety and demoralization

#### **2. Two questions focus on the challenges of demoralization.**

##### **a. How do you help someone get past the feeling of being in a rut or "I don't feel like doing anything?"**

We know how tough this is. Just not feeling capable of anything pleasurable or valuable. Not being able to find energy or motivation. Feeling bad. Feeling stuck. Our advice is to focus on interests that do not take much effort but that might generate noticeable good feelings. We have seen listening to particular meaningful songs. Singing meaningful songs. Doing these things together. Watching something funny on YouTube or TikTok. There are many options. Draw the person’s attention to how enjoyable it is to do together, and then plan to do it and similar activities repeatedly. We have attached a list of suggested activities that can link up to important values, such as being connected, feeling capable, and so on.

One of the most impactful activities we’ve seen in the current situation is inviting the person to help us solve a problem or help us do something enjoyable. Giving advice can be one way to bring up a person’s energy and connection with you, which can inspire continued conversation about things *they* might also want to do. Come up with an action plan that involves both of you (e.g., “Can you look up more music recommendations for me and virtual museum tours, and I will share the song you told me about today with my relative and see if it helps them have more energy?”) – this equalizes the relationship and encourages action that contributes to others (you, your friends, family). You can then draw conclusions about it being beneficial, and worth doing again. This is how

momentum builds. We also discuss navigating this challenge in the first webinar on Creative Connection during COVID, which can be found [here](#).

**b. Strategies for engaging individuals who were apathetic before COVID-19 and thus now struggling even more finding/feeling pleasure in activities?**

Since we are all facing the same COVID predicament in terms of risk and loss, empathizing with the struggle finding pleasure is straightforward, we all feel it. The way forward is to find something you can do together that will rouse the positive affect. Since we are in the pandemic together, doing something collaboratively or sharing ideas we can both try between contacts can often help. The responses to the question above (not and not feeling like it) apply here, as well.

**3. Two questions and a comment concern “guided discovery” questioning to get the most value out of positive experiences.**

**a. If you can clarify (in the email) how the "conclusion"/noticing the good---is stronger than just doing positive activities on your own (without paying attention to the good)?**

Our experience — both personally and with clients — is that positive experiences feel good but can fade pretty quickly. This is why we emphasize the importance of drawing conclusions. There are many meanings we can get out of the experiences that will help us do more of this kind of activity, prolong the good feeling, see our best selves, live our best selves. We often give the example of the individual who goes to music group every week, but sleeps the rest of the time. While in the group, this person is dynamic, alive, a leader, having fun. Helping him notice this, think about when he can do it at other times, what the best part is, and what it says about him that he leads everyone to have a better time — all of these can help him develop his proclivity, sleep less, do more that he enjoys and connect with others. This is the flip side of the cognitive model. Just as you can focus on making the negative self less powerful, the guided discovery and drawing conclusions can strengthen the positive self. In the first two [webinars](#), we also talked about how this process has health benefits. The attached suggested questions, as well as those noted in the response below, help individuals take away and strengthen beliefs about connection, capability, resilience, progress, and other positive beliefs that improve self-concept and inspire empowerment over challenges. Positive experiences are the evidence, in a way, that these strengths-based beliefs are accurate.

**b. What types of questions can help clients draw their own conclusions about these positive experiences?**

We have attached a list of questions you might use. Here are some key questions that you can ask individuals, that you can reflect on yourself after a positive experience, or that you can discuss as a family:

- What does it say about you that you did this? (Similarly, what does it say about me or us)
- What was the best part of this?
- By doing this, what does it say about my ability to connect or show my resilience?

If you find that it's difficult for someone to answer the more open-ended questions, you can frame in a close-ended way that gives the person the opportunity to indicate if they agree. Some examples:

- So it sounds like when you hosted the online game night with your cousins you were really connected and able to bring people together, would you agree?
- If you were able to connect with them this way, is it possible you may be able to connect with them again? Or with others?

- Would you agree that you were really able to take control of your stress by doing that exercise video? What does that say about whether or not you should do it again?
- What does that mean about your ability to take control over stress?

**c. Reflecting on plays a key role on what we do.**

Reflecting is important, especially when focused upon the meanings of the activity. It is like feedback. For example — it felt good to do it and means that I am capable of doing things with others that realize my values to help other people have fun and just feel themselves.

**4. Three questions focused upon activities.**

**a. Does this differ from "gratitude" practices? It seems to be more focused on things the person/client did versus things that are happening in their life.**

This is a good observation. We definitely want to be experiential, as much as possible. While not required, gratitude can have a role in this. It feels good to be grateful for what we have, those that have helped us. We would want to say that these gratitude exercise can help us locate what we care about. Are there activities we can engage in that bring our values to life?

**b. How do you move from distractions into grounding activities?**

The activities that you can do are the same, it is the way you do them that will have the best impact. We have had individuals tell us that they find the concept of distracting to be invalidating. People are upset for good reasons. They know this. It just becomes overwhelming and potentially counterproductive in the long-term. Distraction is also hard to maintain for very long. You know you are distracting from the bad stuff, so the bad stuff stays in the back of your mind while you are distracting. After a bit, you might go back to dwelling on all of the negative stuff. Refocusing is not invalidating and can be sustained longer-term. You can do grounding exercises to lower distress enough to then think about where to put the energy that will be of most benefit, and then do it, and notice that benefit (feeling better, helping others, having fun). As we said during the session, using grounding is a choice. It gives you control. Choosing to refocus is also a choice. More control for you. What does it say about you that you were able to use grounding to feel better then refocus the energy in helping other people? Are you more resilient and strong than you thought? What does it say about doing this more often?

**c. Can you explain the bucket list game?**

We apologize for any confusion regarding the English idiomatic expression *bucket list*. It derives from another English idiom, *kick the bucket*, and refers to experiences or achievements that one wants to do or have before they die or *kick the bucket*, if you will. A bucket list is a wish list of important activities you want to do. We have found that asking about bucket list items is a good way for some people to elicit important pursuits that we term *aspirations*. There is a game you can play with the bucket list that reveals the importance of aspirations to all of us. It takes two people. The first person thinks of one of their important life wish list items. The second proceeds to ask questions to learn about the aspiration, not to plan how to achieve it. The second person can ask what it would mean to achieve it, what it would feel like, what would be the best part. The second person can ask the person to paint a picture of it, using images and other senses to really imagine it. The two people can change roles and do it again, having the first person ask about the second's bucket list item. Activities like this create energy and

momentum for action, which helps to refocus energy off of distress and onto meaningful pursuits. This exercise is also described in more detail in the second webinar on [Purpose Every Day](#).

## 5. Three questions asked about specific settings or clients.

### a. I work in a locked psychosis unit. I am in lockdown (shielding due to chronic respiratory condition). I am setting up online programs for my clients. Do you have any ideas that may be helpful?

Constraints like you mention, that are required for safety, can make for some of the most meaningful and creative programming that we have seen during this pandemic. We know creative arts therapists who Zoom their exercise morning club to several units simultaneously, expanding the connection while remaining physically distant, creating a collective feeling of helping each other out through activity and safety. Many activities can be done this way. We know of inpatient quarantine cafes, where tables are set at a distance, one person per table, but the way it's discussed is less about needing safe distance and more about special seating (almost like you're fine dining) – simple language changes have shown to have significant impact reducing individuals' stress. You could do this via video – sharing a snack or drink together while talking to increase connection. We also know of inpatient BINGO games where people call out from their rooms. A colleague of ours working in the Department of Veterans Affairs ran a group via web that started with a dance party – each person listening to the song of their choice and dancing together, or playing it over the web program. Some of the most impactful activities you do remotely will be those that maintain connection (which is why we highly recommend activities that are enjoyable and energizing) and those that focus on identifying aspirations. You might also find the [CT-R Telehealth guide](#) helpful.

### b. I work with the substance abuse population. It's very difficult for them during the COVID-19. How would you advise me to encourage them to refocus?

The implications of COVID-19, such as sheltering in place, can understandably activate beliefs that drive substance use: beliefs about being disconnected, beliefs related to uncertainty, beliefs of being unable to tolerate increased anxiety or other strong emotions that arise; beliefs related to wanting to numb all of these feelings or to cope with grief and loss that may be experienced during this time, or permission-giving beliefs such as “there's nothing else to do so why not?”

To determine which beliefs are key, we want to first identify **what is most important to the person with regard to their use** (whether it is in the past but tempting, or actively occurring). We do this by asking: ***“What is the best part of using [use whatever term they use to describe it, e.g., drinking, smoking pot, etc]?”*** The person's response will give us information about important meanings they may otherwise believe they don't have. For example, someone might say: “The only time I belong is when I drink.” – this lets us know that connection is a meaningful value. Similarly, wanting to feel less stressed or anxious may reflect the importance of having a sense of control. In any event, we use this information to guide the refocusing. What can the person do that day, and what can they plan to predictably experience throughout the week, to meet that desired meaning?

For connection, perhaps it is joining a group of people online to play trivia or cooking and delivering a meal to a neighbor's doorstep. For control over stress, perhaps it is planning daily walks or exercise, making progress toward a post-crisis goal such as studying for a school entrance exam, or working on a hands-on project like building a garden. In sum, the most powerful refocusing strategies we have found revolve around identifying valuable meanings and applying them each day.

We also strongly encourage talking with people about **meaningful aspirations** (see our second webinar on Purpose Daily [here](#)). ***If everything was how they wanted it to be, what would it look like and what would be the best part about those things?*** Again – action now can meet those meanings every day, even in these circumstances. Then, we draw conclusions about what it says about them that they are meeting those meanings, and how it gets them closer to their aspirations.

If you have someone who is having difficulty making it through the urges, you can start with introducing the mind-body skills, such as progressive muscle relaxation or mindfulness. When they notice the intensity has reduced – even just a little bit – that can be their cue to refocus attention onto a personally meaningful pursuit. Music, walks, and other interest-based activities can help get through the initial urge; the meaningful refocus *keeps* the attention from turning back to the urge.

**c. What type of activity can help clients with at risk and impulsive behavior?**

To identify what type of activity might be most impactful, you can ask the individual what the best part is of whatever they've engaged in previously that you consider impulsive. Substance use, for example, can be considered using the information in the above question. Other behaviors, such as self-harm, might have other meanings: comfort or control, for example. Other meanings may be uncovered if the behavior is more along the lines of excessive spending, online gambling, throwing parties or not physically distancing. The meanings are personal and may be unique, but the approach is the same: refocusing onto activities that may provide the same desired outcome (connection, control, comfort, etc.) or that produce a similar emotion (joy, excitement, etc.).

We would also encourage you to consider activities that involve less talking and more physical action, if possible. For example, physical exercise, building projects, reorganization, creative arts – anything that requires some energy (that might have otherwise gone toward the impulsive action) but also brings about a sense of accomplishment, connection, contribution to others, pride, and so on. The aim is channeling the energy onto something more meaningful to the person.

**6. Eight responses included suggestions of positive activities to try. These are quite creative. We include each, commenting as we go, and hope this list can inspire activities that will work best for each of you.**

**a. Create a group vision board**

This is a great extension of the vision board we presented during the session (attached). Each person can have a role and make specific contributions. A group mission can be literally visualized. We would advise a next step: thinking with everyone who helped make the board as to what actions they can do together to live their vision now.

**b. Using the time to bring forward skills I had as a child, painting, creating with my hands, playing with my dog in the garden - learning how to groom him because I can't go out to get that done. Making creams and things like that for the body. Creating an online sharing with my clients of what they have found that they forgot they had enjoyed and seeing the beauty coming forward.**

In addition to the great ideas — creative acts such as painting, pet play and care, soothing and cleaning concoctions — this entry has a nice formula for finding these rich activities: asking, “what are interests you had as a child?” These could well be pursuits that you have not focused on in awhile; doing them now adds special value to your best self.

- c. There are many online videos that you can use or a client can use if going for a walk and they are not able to walk outdoors, like a walk I did though the Andes or by the sea, these are awesome.**

Great ways to counter cabin fever and to wet appetite for the world's wonders. This is another example of how constraints (not able to walk outside) can lead to doing activities that we otherwise would not have done. We wonder if a walking club could be set up. Everyone can do an exotic, virtual walk and then share it with others through a tele-medium (zoom, skype, FaceTime, phone).

- d. Attending online yoga, Nia and Mindfulness practices with colleagues.**

This is another great adaptation to prescribed physical distancing. Doing these meaningful, meditative activities together are good for your spirit and body. Online Tai Chi is also a good in this regard. There are other online activities for those who like a more intense physical experience — boot camps, Zumba sessions, workouts, martial arts.

- e. Our team has done “daybreakers” and we start each day with a theme selected by each person from favorite books, superheroes, favorite movie - we have seen how the team has grown in seeing each others strengths and calling on each member in new ways based on something they learned via these daybreakers. We end the week with daybreakers as well so people have other ideas of what they can do over the weekend and to help close out the week.**

Not everyone may know about the creative group activity known as “Daybreakers.” A quote from the movement's website (<https://www.daybreaker.com/our-history/>) captures the essence of the idea: “What if we could dance in the morning before going to work, without substances, and create an inclusive environment to connect, self-express and move our bodies with reckless abandon?” The suggestion here is to use the daybreaker concept very generally (it doesn't have to involve dance) to start and finish the day — with your family, team, or colleagues — by focusing upon connecting together around interests, strengths, new knowledge, etc. The end of the day/week sessions can be a great opportunity to draw conclusions related to your best self.

- f. Also brushing up on Italian, as well, through Babbel**

This is an example of a bucket list desire that can be pursued effectively while engaging in social distancing. Learn a language. To expand the language learning, you might think of finding online communities to practice the new language with. If you have a client that speaks another language, might they be willing to teach you a few things? And, moving beyond language, are there pursuits that you have always wanted to do that can be done while maintaining physical distancing? Learn to draw comics? Make jewelry? Learn to play piano or guitar? All can be done while physically distancing.

- g. I joined a 21 day no sugar challenge with a group of friends.**

This is a variation on the above. Trying to eat better, but bringing in friends to do it with friendly competition. As the group activity progresses, we wonder if you can notice how much better it is to do this together — are there other activities you can pursue as a group?

- h. I have recommended many “memorial” planters as grief arises. Oxytocin building activities.**

This activity exactly hits the theme of our session — transforming hard emotions to valued action. Losing people to the disease and losing freedoms can feel quite defeating. Memorial planters are a way to tap into what we care

about — the value of a person we lost, say — and putting this into the world in something that grows and reminds us of that value. We can talk with others about it. Even better we can do it together even though separated. This is the oxytocin — hormone secreted during social affiliation — building. We would add that the meaning is key and might well be an important source of the benefit of connecting through purposeful activities that realize our values.

## **7. Three suggestions focused upon anxiety**

### **a. Residents have worked on not watching so many news reports to reduce anxiety.**

A lot of people have discussed limiting the news intake, especially when it leads to prolonged dysphoric moods or dwelling on matters beyond our control. Residential facilities can be especially prone to the news playing all day in public spaces. Limiting or scheduling time for news watching seems a good strategy. We would like to gently remind that not doing something can be particularly difficult; replacing the activity with a preferred one has a much better chance of success.

### **b. I try to get clients to record the PMR in session to use later. YouTube also has some excellent resources.**

Ellen gave a few great examples of Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) to de-stress and break set to focus on activities with others that bring meaning. Recording PMR for later use sounds great, as does watching YouTube segment that guides one through a useful routine. The script Ellen referenced is [here](#).

### **c. There are plenty of people who recorded PMR exercises if you like listening to something and following along.**

We love it. There are apps that help you do it, along with websites, and other media. To get the full benefit, you or a client can notice that exercises like PMR yield you a greater sense of control, because you choose to do the activity and feel the benefit. It can also be useful to have activities that bring you meaning ready at hand to refocus upon once you have calmed yourself a bit.

## **8. Three suggestions included activities that help to cultivate hope and fortitude**

### **a. We also do once a week rose, bud and thorn - helping people identify beautiful and positive (rose) , their hope for the great things (bud) and the things that are a struggle that we all help to problem solve with the person (thorn)**

What an interesting mnemonic exercise — using a well-known object such as a rose — to remember beauty, hope, and work on challenges together. The group activity is the key. We wonder, too, if more of the doing together could also be put into the beautiful and positive part of the exercise. The thorns have their place, but so does the flower and bud. Our experience is helping each other with activities that are beautiful and positive, helping each other with hope — these are terrific for everyone!

### **b. Write a letter to your future self about what you learned from this time.**

Another way to focus on the positive you can get out of the ways that COVID is impacting you. You might even think about it from a standpoint of your best self. What does it say about you? Are you stronger than you expected to be? More resilient? Were you able to continue to put effort into activities that you care about? Did you contribute to the collective good? This could be in the form of a letter to remind yourself when things calm down. It could also be a meme or a visual object that reminds you of these qualities of yours and the successes you are having.

**c. I encourage my clients to rewrite their story. They are the authors and they can change their process.**

This strikes us as a variation on the idea of best self full of the good qualities, as opposed to the less good self that is more focused on the negative. We think that rewriting the story is especially effective if you can have experiences that are imbued with the meanings of this (re)newed story line.