

A COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL APPROACH TO RELATIONSHIPS



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Aaron T. Beck, MD, has devoted much of his professional life to a study of dysfunctional thinking in various disorders. As he turned his attention to the problems of couples, he found that they showed the same kind of problem thinking (which he termed cognitive distortions) as did his patients. This pamphlet, based in part on Dr. Beck's book "Love is Never Enough," focuses on intimate couples but the principles can be applied to mates of every kind, including platonic mates, housemates, and roommates across the continua of gender orientations and cultures. In fact, this pamphlet contains valuable lessons for almost any relationship. It also reflects Dr. Beck's more recent emphasis on values and aspirations.

Sean and Sabrina were busy in their jobs and decided to spend more time together. Sabrina, a bartender, had a particularly frustrating week and told Ken that she wanted spend the afternoon shopping. Sean had an especially busy week doing maintenance work in a large office building and, wanting more closeness, decided to accompany her. Sabrina saw this as an intrusion, and thought, "He never lets me do my own thing." She said nothing to Sean and was quiet during the entire shopping expedition. Sean interpreted her silence to mean that she didn't care for him, and snapped, "What are you quiet about? You wanted this!" Sabrina reacted to his anger by withdrawing even more.

The facts of the situation were the following:

1. Sabrina did want to spend more time with Sean but wanted to shop alone.
2. She failed to communicate this desire to Sean.

3. Sean did respect Sabrina's freedom and autonomy but wanted her attention and appreciation.
4. He failed to check on her feelings about his accompanying her on the shopping trip.
5. She misinterpreted his overture as an encroachment on her freedom.
6. He misinterpreted her withdrawal as a lack of love.

Sabrina may have desired connection after time to decompress. Sean may have seen connection as a way to decompress. They got neither. Numerous mistakes and misunderstandings such as these can erode the foundation of partnerships across the spectrum of gender orientations. It is hopeful, however, that individuals can learn to catch these mistakes and correct them before they go too far. There are often several points at which they can head off a storm.

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is designed to help couples do just that— to evaluate their thinking, correct their communication, and focus on what is truly important in the relationship. CBT can help prevent misunderstandings from arising in the first place.



WHAT IS NEEDED TO SUSTAIN A RELATIONSHIP

Although love is a powerful impetus for a couple to help and support one another, to make one another happy, and perhaps to create community, it does not in itself create the substance of the relationship. The qualities and skills crucial to sustaining and growing the partnership arise from individuals acting in accordance with shared values, aspirations, and desires. Common shared values include:

- Commitment, loyalty, responsibility, trustworthiness
- Sensitivity, consideration, cooperation, forgiveness
- Generosity, follow through
- Compromise, resilience, acceptance, and tolerance

Couples may be adept at dealing with people outside the relationship but may lack basic understandings— or the actual skills— to make their own relationship blossom. They find it difficult to make joint decisions or decipher their partners' communications. When a faucet in the house starts to drip, they have the tools to stop the leak, but when love starts to drain away, they have no idea how to staunch the flow.

Individuals entering a partnership intensify expectations of each other. These expectations are fueled by yearnings such as those for unconditional love, loyalty, and support. And these yearnings are rooted in values that they may or may not share with their partner.

The strength of such expectations heightens the hurt and fuels the fear that underlies conflict. Partners are prone to misinterpret one another's actions, blame one another, and feel unable to solve their problems. As difficulties arise and hostilities proliferate, they lose sight of the positive things their mate provides and represents: somebody to support them, to enhance their experiences, and share in building a family. They lose sight of the very values that underlie their expectations. They miss opportunities to better understand their partners.

UNTANGLING THE KNOTS

Research has shown that distressed couples benefit from a structured program that teaches them how to untie the knots that twist their communication, focus on shared values, and make the effort to understand and empathize with their partner. They benefit greatly from eliminating blame and focusing on what they do control: the extent to which their actions promote a loving relationship.

The same program can enhance relationships that are not in trouble. And it has proven effective with couples across differing levels of commitment. In fact, some of the most dramatic successes have occurred in partners who simply wanted to get more out of their relationship.

In evaluating your relationship, you will find it useful to keep in mind what kind of partner you'd like to become in order to improve the relationship. Here are some aims:

First, recognize your values: Sabrina's expectation was that Sean shouldn't intrude in her efforts to de-stress, and should be understanding, respect her autonomy, and let her do her own thing. Such expectations reflect values of autonomy, acceptance, understanding, respect, and freedom. Sabrina has no control over whether Sean's actions are consistent with these values. She only controls whether her own actions are consistent with them. Sean's expectation was that Sabrina shouldn't be so quiet, and should be communicative, affectionate, and openly appreciative of his company. Such expectations reflect values of connection, openness, communication, affection, and appreciation. Sean has no control over whether Sabrina's actions are consistent with these values. He only controls whether his own actions are consistent with these values.

Expectations reflect values, and these values serve as compass point for your actions. This compass point can guide you to greater integrity and a more solid foundation in being a committed ally, supporter, and champion for your partner.

Second, recognize your partner's values: Sabrina is no more against connection, openness and communication than Sean is against autonomy, acceptance and understanding. They just need to put themselves in their partner's shoes and listen for the deeper values implicit in where their partner is hurting. Sabrina could see Sean as impinging on her freedom or as hurting and desiring love. Sean could see Sabrina as cold and unloving or as overwhelmed and desiring space. Such empathy enables you to cultivate the tender, loving part of your relationship so your partner can see you as a confidante,



companion, and friend.

Third, foster a spirit of collaboration: Sabrina responded to Sean's intrusion with hostile silence. Sean responded to her silence with critical questions. They can sharpen their communication skills with empathic listening and respectful assertiveness. Sean could say, "You haven't been speaking much, and you seem a little tense or preoccupied. I'm curious and concerned right now, because I know how hard you've been working and that it's taken quite a toll." Sabrina could say, "That's right, I have been quiet and I can see how you might feel hurt or rejected. I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed at work now and just wanted some space to sort out my feelings, but I really



appreciate how you've supported me through all this." In a compassionate manner, you can express your feelings and acknowledge your partner's.

Fourth, look for mutually satisfying alternatives: Sean and Sabrina can find ways to satisfy both their desires for connection and autonomy. Focusing on how values can overlap, they can generate ways to spend time together without adding to their overall stress level. Sean offered Sabrina respect by asking if she would prefer some time to shop alone. Sabrina offered Sean appreciation by thanking him and suggesting a joint activity. Such a spirit of cooperation and consideration enables you to solve a problem using four

straightforward steps:

1. to define what you and your partner want
2. to determine the specifics of your differences
3. to brainstorm until you have generated a variety of possible solutions, and
4. to select a solution that satisfies both of you the most.

In summary, Cognitive Behavior Therapy can provide tools to improve communication, correct misinterpretations, and enhance the healthiest aspects of your connection. Rather than blaming your partner, you take full responsibility for improving the partnership. This "no fault, no blame" attitude helps you and your partner better understand one another and solve mutual problems. With an increased understanding of what makes you and your partner tick, you will be able to enrich your relationship.

CBT RESOURCES

BECK INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy was established in 1994 by Dr. Aaron T. Beck and Dr. Judith S. Beck as a setting for state-of-the-art psychotherapy and professional training in CBT. In our 25-year history, Beck Institute has built exceptional in-person and online trainings in CBT, trained thousands of professionals from around the world, and created a global community of CBT practitioners.

PSYCHOTHERAPY

Cognitive behavior therapists can help you identify, evaluate, and modify your unhelpful ideas and behavior that lead to negative conclusions about yourself and others. They can also help you figure out ways to more effectively manage day-to-day problems. With your effort and their guidance, you can learn skills to reduce interpersonal conflict and help you and your partner feel better and stay better. To learn more about clinical services at Beck Institute, call 610.664.3020 or email intake@beckinstitute.org.

ONLINE RESOURCES:

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