TURN STRESS INTO OPPORTUNITY: THE CBC APPROACH TO STRESS MANAGEMENT COACHING

By Laurel Alexander, author, tutor and founder of Wellness Professionals at Work

USING STRESS AS AN OPPORTUNITY

What do we mean by the term “stress” in relation to the human condition? We could say that a certain amount of tension gives drive to our motivation while too much stress leads to being overstretched and the potential for snapping.

We can get so immersed in life that we are sometimes blind to the harm excess stress is having on our physical and psychological health. What we are looking for is just enough stress to give life zest. Therefore we need to recognise when we are reaching our stress threshold and at such times, how we can use stress as an opportunity for positive change.

Change

In my book How to Incorporate Wellness Coaching into Your Therapeutic Practice, I write about the influence of change on our stress levels. The more major life changes that have occurred in your life during the past couple of years, the greater the chances of your becoming physically or emotionally ill (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Alvin Toffler (1970) wrote a best seller, Future Shock which sets out the idea that technology was producing such rapid change that people felt unable to keep up with the
accelerating flow of information and choices. On the other hand, an equal amount of stress or frustration is caused by changes being made too slowly rather than too fast e.g. racial prejudice or changes we'd like to make at work but can't (Siegelman 1983). Siegelman also believes that there is an opposite force to the resistance to change. It is natural to seek change, to master new challenges, explore the unknown and to test ourselves. Siegelman says "mastering the anxiety of venturing promotes new levels of growth."

**Stress and health**

Chronic stress can be the result of many repeated cycles of acute stress such as a difficult job situation or chronic disease. Threat on a long-term basis, sends the message to our systems that our survival mechanisms of fight or flight need to be continually activated.

Many functions in the body turn off because they are not needed in the fight or flight responses while other functions are activated to higher than normal levels. However, when we are not in danger, continued activation of the stress response is not necessary. The result of the stress response causing imbalances throughout normally functioning systems in the body and when we experience such responses, especially over an extended period, we need to make some changes to redress the balance.

We know that the mind has a powerful impact on the body. Individuals who are chronically pessimistic, angry or anxious tend to be more susceptible to stress and illness. Similarly, almost every medical illness affects people psychologically as well as physically (Hales, 2003).

Stress hormones impact on the immune system, suppressing it and making the body less capable of fighting disease and infection. The effects of a compromised immune system include everything from low level infections, to the rate of wound healing, and even a link with breast cancer development. In research on women with metastatic breast cancer, psychiatrist David Spiegel found that stress hormones played a role in the progression of breast cancer (1989). The average survival time of women with normal cortisol patterns was significantly longer than that of women whose cortisol levels remained high throughout the day (an indicator of stress).

In addition, these conditions have been shown to have a stress component; abnormal heartbeat, alcoholism, asthma, chronic fatigue, chronic tension headaches, heart disease, depression, erectile dysfunction, skin disorders, high blood pressure, fertility, fibromyalgia, insomnia, IBS, menstrual difficulties, MS and ulcerative colitis.
COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL COACHING AS A STRESS MANAGEMENT TOOL

A key stress management skill is cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) which is derived from cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). CBT evolved out of Joseph Wolpe’s behaviour therapy (1950s), which combined with elements of Aaron Beck’s Cognitive Therapy, Albert Ellis’ Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy, and a number of other influences from the cognitive approaches to psychotherapy, appeared in the 1950s and 1960s.

Cognitive behavioural approaches emphasize that how we react to events is largely determined by our views of them, not by the events themselves which is the view of modern stress management. Through re-evaluating unhelpful mindsets, we can implement alternative viewpoints that may be more effective in aiding problem-solving and changing behaviour. CBC is founded on the understanding that feelings and behaviours are directly affected by the way a person thinks. These faulty patterns of thinking give rise to emotional distress and by altering these unrealistic thought patterns and changing inappropriate behaviours, clients can reduce emotional distress.

CBC seeks, through collaborative activity, to facilitate a time limited, goal-directed and present focused process, to help clients reach their own solutions in order to build stress-resilience. CBC can help clients alter how they think (cognitive) and what they do (behaviour).

An example

There are helpful and unhelpful ways of reacting to most situations, depending on how you think about them. Imagine you’ve been diagnosed as a pre-diabetic.
Thoughts

Unhelpful: My body’s out of control.
Helpful: I need to know what I can do to help myself.

Feelings

Helpful: Curious.

Physical

Helpful: Calm breathing.

Behaviour

Unhelpful: Not listening.
Helpful: Questioning and listening.

The same situation has led to two different results. How you think, has affected how you felt and what you did. The unhelpful route leads to negativity. The helpful route is potentially more productive.

Using the ABC model

Albert Ellis developed the ABC model which describes the sequence of events that ultimately lead to our experienced feelings. He recommends that people break down their experience into these three areas in order to discover if irrational beliefs are present:

"A" is the activating event: Activating events are the experiences we encounter. These events are described in factual, objective terms e.g. I stay late at work until 7pm on most weekdays.

"B" is the belief: This is where you access faulty thinking, images and beliefs.

"C" is the consequent emotions: The resulting feelings experienced as a result of your interpretation of the event.

For example, imagine two people with IBS, one sinks into depression and apathy while the other explores how his stress levels influence his condition. If our emotions are a product of experience only, then why did only one become depressed and remain inactive? If emotions were caused solely by events then both would have resorted to depression. Albert Ellis would argue that the two people appraised the provocation in different ways. Consider four possible emotional outcomes of the same event:
### ACTIVATING EVENT  |  BELIEF  |  CONSEQUENT EMOTIONS
--- | --- | ---
I have IBS | I’m a loser | Depression
I have IBS | My body has let me down | Frustration, Anger
I have IBS | No one can help me | Anxiety, panic
I have IBS | I want to understand my stress | Curiosity, Hopefulness triggers so I can improve my health.

What this illustration suggests is that our emotions are largely dependent on how we evaluate ourselves via our underlying beliefs related to an event. We create an understanding of ourselves and the world around us based on our experience and learned responses. Therefore, we are each going to differ with regard to the styles of thinking we engage with.

When using CBC in stress management coaching, clients need to learn how to pay attention to automatic thoughts, recognize those which are faulty and reframe realistic interpretations along with changing inappropriate behaviours.

**The 8-step process to using CBC in stress management coaching**

Presenting clients with a problem-solving model helps. B. Wasik (1984) proposed a 7-step problem solving sequence and accompanying questions that people can ask themselves at each step:

1. **Problem identification**  
   What is the concern?

2. **Goal selection**  
   What do I want?
### Generation of alternatives
**What can I do?**

### Consideration of consequences
**What might happen?**

### Decision-making
**What is my decision?**

### Implementation
**Now do it!**

### Evaluation
**Did it work?**

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I’ve taken this 7-step sequence of and adapted it to an 8-step CBC sequence for stress management coaching:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Problem Identification</td>
<td><strong>What is the real problem here?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The CBC Choice</td>
<td><strong>What is the CBC process? Is CBC the right methodology for me to use with my current problem?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Goal Selection</td>
<td><strong>What do I want my stress management goal to be based on my problem? What do I want as opposed to what do I not want?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Exploring &amp; Challenging Faulty Thinking</td>
<td><strong>What are my faulty thoughts? How can I challenge and dispute my faulty thought processes?</strong></td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Choices &amp; Consequences</td>
<td><strong>What might be the consequences of staying with faulty thinking? What choices do I have? What might happen if I choose this or that?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Decision-Making &amp; Action Planning</td>
<td><strong>What is my decision? How am I going to implement it?</strong></td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td><strong>It happens.</strong></td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td><strong>How did it work for me? How do I feel as a result of this change? What else might I need to change?</strong></td>
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A client will fully engage in stress management coaching when they are motivated. Sometimes the motivations are blurred and therefore hold back the client from getting the best from the coaching process. CBC can help uncover beliefs and motivations and where appropriate, reframe them so that positive change can occur.

Note to editors

About Wellness Professionals at Work

Wellness Professionals at Work offers career coaching, business start-up and flexible learning opportunities, to those wanting to get into the industry and those already working in it who would like to improve best practice. WPAW offer qualifications and CPD courses including the Diploma in Stress Management Coaching and are:

- an organisational and training provider member of the Association for Coaching
- independently accredited by the National Council of Psychotherapists as a CPD Centre
- a recognized and authorized course provider of the Complementary Medical Association

For more information, please visit www.wellnessprofessionalsatwork.com.

About Laurel Alexander

Laurel’s passion for health and wellness over the past 25 years has led her to two businesses; Wellbeing for Life offering complementary therapy and coaching and Wellness Professionals at Work.

Laurel is an experienced author, tutor and therapist in the wellness industry and has written 30 books on various wellness related subjects. Laurel has worked with many organisations to deliver courses, coaching and advice on wellness and stress management and has appeared in the media including on Meridian TV. Laurel is a Fellow of the National Council of Psychotherapists.

Book examples:

- 30 books published on health, career management, business and training including:
  - How to Incorporate Wellness Coaching into Your Therapeutic Practice (Jessica Kingsley)
  - Women’s Wisdom: natural wellness strategies for menstruation (Findhorn Press)
• Women’s Wisdom: natural wellness strategies for pregnancy (Findhorn Press)
• Women’s Wisdom: natural wellness strategies for the menopause years (Findhorn Press)
• Everyday Calm (Octopus)
• Medicine Uncovered (Trotman)
• Getting into Complementary Therapies (Trotman)
• Getting into Healthcare Professions (Trotman).

Client examples:

• Brighton & Hove City Council (stress coach for the Ninelives Campaign).
• Designed and delivered wellbeing courses for: Sussex Hospital Trust - Sussex Career Services - WEA - University of Sussex - Brighton and Hove City College - Business & Professional Women UK – Social Service Family Centres - Breast Cancer Care Charity – Sussex Down College staff - Seeboard staff - Lewes Prison - International Stress Management Association – MIND staff - British Gas staff – Dryad staff - Turning Point Charity - Tinnitus Association - Nigel Porter Unit, Royal Sussex County Hospital - Institute of Nursing & Midwifery, University of Brighton (Cancer Nursing Pathway Course)
• Trained personnel to qualification level in stress management and coaching for; West Sussex County Council, Protocol Skills, Ford Motor Company, Priory Group, South Downs NHS Health Trust, Travellers Worldwide and American Express, Brighton & Hove Council, University of Sussex and Emirates Airlines.

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