MCBIT: an integrative approach for Mindfulness and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

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According to many authors, some mindfulness-based therapies (MBSR, MBCT, dialectic therapy, and ACT) are introducing a new paradigm into cognitive behavioural therapy. In this article, we would like to present a specific variation of the standard ABC model, specially designed to explain the integrative power of CBT and the inherent possibility of integrating Mindfulness and CBT. The ABC presented here represents a slight modification of the traditional cognitive and behavioural model already known as ABC and has been developed for the following purposes: 1. To provide clearer information for patients on cognitive and behavioural therapy integrated with mindfulness. 2. To provide an effective functional analysis. 3. To create a basic acronym and metaphor for patients’ use in most MCBIT interventions. 4. To give patients a tool for their work at home, in the form of a worksheet or diary, and 5. To overcome the confusing idea of new paradigms, providing, instead, an integrative approach to mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy.

Metaphors to describe models of the mind

The most important psychotherapies of the 20th century all use more or less explicit models of the mind based on metaphors drawn from other sciences.

The Freudian metaphor for the mind

Sigmund Freud built all his models of the mind using an anatomical metaphor. His so-called first topic drew a sharp distinction between the unconscious on one hand and the conscious on the other. The unconscious and the conscious were not just perceptions. Freud did not use them to signify more or less awareness of psychological events. His idea was that they were two different structures, like anatomical organs with different functions, as elsewhere in the body. Further psychoanalytical models have not changed the underlying basic metaphor: ES, EGO and SUPER-EGO are other “organs” concerned with drives, reality judgment, and morality respectively. We could also say that EROS and THANATOS are similar structures. The limitations of the Freudian model arise from the limitations of this metaphor. Sigmund Freud was aware of the contradictions emerging from his model but was unable to overcome them; when he worked on new models, he in fact remained a prisoner of the anatomical metaphor. This metaphor restricted Freud to examining the functions of different “organs”, and prevented him from describing the functions of the whole person.

The behavioural metaphor for the mind

It is a neural-reflex metaphor, in which a given stimulus produces a reaction. Interestingly, even the consequence of the behaviour is termed “reinforcement” of the stimulus.

In other words, the stimulus-reaction remains at the centre of the model. The limitations of the model result from the limitations of the metaphor, which makes the
conception of any kind of internal processing of information impossible, since only reflexes are concerned.

The cognitive metaphor for the mind

The cognitive model tried to overcome the neural-reflex metaphor and introduced a “software” metaphor based on the idea that different programs generate different behaviours: change the program, and you change the behaviour. It is interesting to note that emotions are conceived as external to the model, that is they are a kind of secondary effect arising from the difference between humans and computers. Again, the limitations of the model are related to the limitations of the underlying metaphor. Usually, it first requires a change of program to bring about a change in behaviour or emotions. This implies that there is a causative linear model involved. But this is contradicted by the fact that behaviour can change the “programs” in a more complex circular fashion.

The systemic metaphor for the mind

The systemic model is a well known cybernetic metaphor. This is the first circular model in the field of psychotherapy, based on the idea that the environment acts as a regulator of the behaviour, and the behaviour acts as a regulator of the environment. A thermostat is a typical example. The limitation of the metaphor is related to the lack of any explanation of those human actions which do not produce stability.

Mindfulness and ACT’s underlying model of the mind

Although Contextual Psychology and Relational Frame Theory are not, by definition, concerned with relations among psychological events and do not explicitly describe any model of the mind, their concept is consistent (and can only be consistent) with a self-referential, recursive, and parallel processing idea of the mind. Words refer to things and therefore to words - words that refer to other words. Relations between elements of the world can be derived starting from arbitrary cues, and then transformed by linking them in different frames of relations. Mutual entailment, combinatorial entailment and transformation of functions are, strictly speaking, self-referential, recursive and parallel processes of the mind.

The same could be said about mindfulness. Paying attention to the present moment, adopting an non-judgemental attitude, is a choice, a behavioural attitude that is assumed to bring about a deep modification of thoughts and emotions. So, instead of trying to modify the program, it is the behaviour that breaks self referential and recursive pattern. But it must be acknowledged that this is exactly what the Behavioural approach assumes about change. To be honest, it is not a new paradigm, but a deeper insight into the old one. Moreover, it is interesting to observe the effectiveness of cognitive and behavioural language in order to convey new concepts and new approaches.

A new ABC

ABCs
ACT would appear not to be merely one new set of techniques among others, but to represent a real advance in the cognitive and behavioural field. Although it is grounded on the empirical tradition and the behavioural and cognitive mainframe, ACT is supposed to bring a paradigmatic shift in some methods and principles. From this point of view, it is part of a so called “third wave”, the first being the “behavioural wave” and the second the “cognitive wave”.

Each “wave” has implicitly adopted a specific model used in psychotherapy and called functional analysis or “ABC”.

In the first ABC - the behavioural ABC, “A” stands for “Antecedents”, “B” for “Behaviour” and “C” for “Consequences”. This model reflects the behavioural sequence of “stimulus”, “response”, and “reinforcement”.

In the second ABC – which we call the cognitive ABC, “A” stands for “Antecedents”, “B” for “Beliefs” and “C” for “(emotional and behavioural) Consequences”. This model reflects the introduction of the cognitive idea that it is not the event per se that stimulates the emotional (and behavioural) consequences, but that the emotions are consequences of beliefs about the event, and that only by transforming (restructuring) these beliefs is it possible to change bad emotional consequences.

But we must acknowledge that both these ABCs are still valid and useful depending on the context of the therapy’s specific goals at a particular moment. For example, if you want a patient to learn about the value of exposure, it might be useful to show how avoidance acts as a negative reinforcement of anxiety, and fails to serve as a “cure” to it. In a different case, with a patient who is not aware of their own thoughts, it might be necessary to focus on the cognitive ABC in order to show them how their reaction to the event is related to their own thoughts and beliefs.

From an integrative perspective, a new important element is being introduced here into the cognitive behavioural model: whatever the content of beliefs and emotions may be, it is the attitude towards them that makes the difference. The more a patient struggles against these, the deeper they seem to sink into emotional crises. Conversely, when a patient accepts their own thoughts, emotions, and physical feelings for what they are, they are more capable of freeing themselves from their problems and making better choices about their lives.

The theoretical model underlying this paradox is the Relational Frame Theory (Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson, 1999; Hayes, 2001) and the MBCT and MBSR programs.

I do not intend to describe these models here, but to focus on the interesting outcome when a new integrative ABC is introduced, in comparison with traditional ABCs.

Below is a possible format for representing the new ABC:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antecedents</th>
<th>Thoughts/Emotions/Feelings</th>
<th>Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Beyond the reinforcement paradigm (beyond the behavioural ABC)

The Relational Frame Theory introduces into the behavioural paradigm the idea that not only short term, but also longer term, consequences of our behaviour can act as reinforcers. More importantly, even consequences that have never actually been experienced in the past can do so. This crucial concept relies on the observation that human behaviour is mostly governed by language-constructed rules. Let us look at a hypothetical example. You have had a very destructive argument with your partner, and you think they are wrong and should apologize. You are also worried that they might leave you, so you will perhaps be waiting for a “fateful” phone call. Every time the phone rings you feel anxious. In the past, a phone ringing has never caused you anxiety. Neither have you been reinforced by this experience in the past (which is happening for the first time). You have literally constructed the meaning (transformed the function) of your partner’s decision, starting from other completely different experiences and ending up by connecting your anxiety about your partner’s decision to waiting for the phone to ring.

Another important concept in ACT is that this kind of cognitive construction adds more suffering to our inevitable pain when we struggle against it. Let’s say that you don’t want to be anxious when the phone rings because it would be a sign of weakness and if you are weak your partner will leave you anyway. What happens then? Maybe you will either be more anxious whenever you hear a ring, or you may adopt some kind of self-deception such as leaving the house to prove to yourself that you are not interested in waiting for a stupid phone call. You will still be ignorant of your partner’s decision, so the result is that you end up being more anxious and depressed. As your behaviour may be a function of your attempt to get rid of your anxiety, the key question is: what should you do about your anxiety?

In ACT this is called the functional context of behaviour: what is the purpose of such behaviour? In the “new ABC”, the “reinforcement consequences” column found in the behavioural ABC has been changed to a “choice” column.

The C column makes it very clear that you are reacting to your own thoughts, emotions and physical feelings (self-referentiality).

ACT makes use of a Bad Stuff Cup metaphor: when people try to get rid of the “bad stuff” in the B column, more “bad stuff” is added to it (it is a recursive pattern).

Using this interesting paradoxical and metaphorical tool has the effect of showing that as soon as you have tried to remove “bad stuff” from your B column more of it pours in.

Hence the name for the B column: “Bad Stuff Box”.

The dichotomy is between a “reaction” to the thoughts, emotions and physical feelings of the B column i.e. a behaviour whose function is an attempt to get rid of the B column contents or a “response” to the B column, i.e. an acceptance of the thoughts, emotions and physical feelings, leading to the possibility of a choice of actions, according to personal values and goals.

Beyond the cognitive restructuring paradigm (beyond the cognitive ABC)

Another important shift in paradigm introduced by ACT is about cognitive restructuring. ACT reduces the importance of trying to change the content of beliefs since this only results in the addition of a new “rule”, rather than elimination and substitution of what is undesirable. You may strongly believe that your new cognitive evaluation is true, but the old relations are still ready to show up. A classic example of this situation is the patient suffering from Panic Disorder. Even if they are strongly convinced they are not dying or becoming mad, they are either overwhelmed by the experience of a panic attack, or they are still...
avoiding places and situations as if dying or becoming mad were still true. The point here is not to change the belief (the two opposite beliefs just coexist: I am not dying, I am dying), but not to be caught by them both, as well as by all the other thoughts.

This is called in ACT “defusing” from the language, i.e. taking care of and developing an observing self capable of noticing thoughts and emotions as they come and go, without being fused with them.

It is also important to convey the idea that part of human suffering is not a linear causative consequence of a psychological problem, but something you can chose to get out of, by adopting an accepting context.

There is another useful model for illustrating the new ABC. It shows that an observing stance can be adopted. The model distinguishes between “the world” i.e. what I can perceive externally, “the mind” i.e. what I can observe internally, and “me” i.e. the contextual self.

It provides an easy and intuitive representation of the way choice can be used for getting out of the mind, and observing how strongly one can be caught up in destructive self-referential and recursive patterns. The choice is simply to accept the parallel processes as they are.

Conclusions

In line with Contextual Psychology and the Relational Frame Theory, emotional problems can be described in terms of recursive processes.

Getting out of the mind – to quote a well known book by Stephen Hayes – in this connection, means breaking the pattern of recursive processes and adopting a non-judgmental attitude towards all (parallel) processes experienced by a person.

The new ABC conveys the idea of breaking recursive patterns, and combines in a single tool functional analysis and the ideas of contextual self, defusion, and choice.

In the second model mentioned – me, the world and the mind, acceptance of the contextual self, observation of the destructive, self-referential and recursive pattern, and the adoption of
non judgemental observation of parallel processing are further conceptualizations of the new ABC.
This model is not a “new paradigm”, but a further development of the behavioural paradigm: change is learning new behaviours.
The mindfulness practice and its documented effect on the brain is an interesting proof that the standard old fashioned behavioural approach is still valid.

References
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