Self-esteem within cognitive behavioural coaching: a theoretical framework to integrate theory with practice

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Aim of study

Cognitive behavioural coaching is an integrative approach that has developed since the early 1990s. It combines the use of cognitive, behavioural and problem-solving techniques to enable coaches to improve performance, resilience and enhance coachees’ well being. This study highlights the use of cognitive behavioural coaching in overcoming low self-esteem. Low self-esteem has been shown to impact on action planning and motivation – the authors provide practitioners with an array of strategies and tools they can use to work with clients’ self-esteem issues.

Background

What is self-esteem?

Rosenberg defines self-esteem as the way individuals feel towards themselves. Research suggests that a negative self-view on a specific domain of our life (e.g. academic abilities) impacts our general feelings of self-worth – this is often referred to as low self-esteem. Individuals with low self-esteem engage in negative self-evaluations and are highly dependent on external feedback.

How do individuals make self-evaluations about the different domains of their life?

Research suggests that individuals engage in self-evaluations not just by asking, “How good or bad am I?” but also:

- How good or bad am I in comparison to other people – social comparisons
- How good or bad am I in comparison to how I was in the past and how I will be in the future – temporal comparisons, especially popular in people who are undergoing major personal changes
- How good or bad do other people think I am – reflective appraisals that develop from social experiences
- How big is the discrepancy between my actual and my ideal self – self discrepancy provides us with a more accurate evaluation of our self-esteem

How can Cognitive Behavioural Coaching (CBC) improve coachees’ self-esteem?

1. In CBC techniques are used to help coachees recognize negative thoughts (e.g. I’m a failure) and irrational beliefs (e.g. If I don’t perform well I will lose my job)
2. Coaches help clients identify the critical aspects of the activating events that trigger negative self-beliefs that are also accompanied by negative emotions like anxiety
3. CBC enables belief modification, especially when dealing with coachees who are reluctant to change and show perfectionist tendencies
Tools and Strategies

Authors suggest that the following 4 strategies will reduce coachees’ negative thinking and facilitate psychological robustness and resilience:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Modification of Thinking Errors</th>
<th>Downward Arrow</th>
<th>Cost-benefit analysis of a belief</th>
<th>Defining beliefs on specific domains of the self</th>
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<td>Aim</td>
<td>Help coachees move towards rational, realistic self-acceptance</td>
<td>Help coachees uncover negative core self-beliefs</td>
<td>Help coachees in evaluating solutions to problems and weighing up decisions</td>
<td>Help coachees challenge global core beliefs about themselves</td>
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| Process  | - Elicit automatic negative thoughts  
|          | - Challenge their associated irrational beliefs  
|          | - Correct the way coachees gather information about self | - Use situational critical thoughts (e.g. lack of ability to provide feedback as a manager) as the entry point in identifying deep-seated self-critical beliefs (e.g. I am a failure as a manager) | - Used during belief modification  
|          |                                                                          | - Coaches are encouraged to consider the advantages and disadvantages of holding onto to a negative belief through visualisation | - Enables coachees to de-construct and break down in different components absolute self-judgments (e.g. I am a failure as a manager) |
| Method/Examples | The coach uses questions to dispute self-critical beliefs:  
|          | 1. Empirical: Where is the evidence that other people think negative of you?  
|          | 2. Logical: Is it logical to assume that failing a task means that you are a failure?  
|          | 3. Third person perspective: What would you say to a friend who had failed a similar task? | The coach asks repeatedly about what a situational negative thought means to the client:  
|          | Coachee: I will mess up the feedback process  
|          | Coach: If you mess it up what does it mean to you?  
|          | Coachee: That I am not a good manager  
|          | Coach: And if that’s the case, what does it mean to you  
|          | Coachee: That I am a complete failure | 1. The coach or coachee draws a 4x4 table with an old belief (e.g. I am not a good manager) and a new or revised belief (e.g. I am a good enough manager)  
|          | 2. A written analysis is then conducted of the advantages and disadvantages of either holding onto the old belief, or taking a new more flexible view | 1. The coach uses a pie chart to help coachee identify specific components of a core belief  
|          | 2. These components are chosen based on the principle that they make up that belief – they are also weighted:  
|          | Example: I am not a good manager  
|          | Components:  
|          | - Giving feedback  
|          | - Empowering employees  
|          | - Providing support  
|          | - Understanding work balance | |
| End result | - Weaken old beliefs  
|          | - Strengthen helpful alternatives | - Coaches explore their work-related negative self-beliefs that contribute to their low self-esteem | - Coaches are able to see more clearly the impact of a negative self-belief on various aspects of their life | - Coaches are able to see that they may be placing too much emphasis on negative domains (e.g. giving feedback) and ignoring those where they are functioning well (e.g. empowering employees)  
|          |                                                                          |                                                                          | - Coaches can also draw plans of actions with their coach for self-development |

Limitations / Questions

- The study provides a theoretical framework bringing together research on self-esteem and cognitive behavioural coaching. Further empirical research is needed to establish the extent to which the strategies discussed can have a significant impact on coachees’ self-esteem in different coaching engagements.

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