

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY IN ACTION

THE “1-2-3” METHOD OF BRAIN RETRAINING

Chronic worry, fear, obsessions and compulsions are all habits. Bad habits. They can cause so much suffering and interference with ones life that they could even be considered addictions. But despite the nature of or cause of the bad habit it can be broken and replaced with a new good habit. The process of resisting the powerful urge of the old habit and working to create a new good habit is very difficult. While bad habits are effortless, fast and powerful automatic thoughts or behaviors; the new habit is created by purposeful, deliberate, mindful and intense conscious effort. The old habit occurs automatically but the new habit has to be created with much effort.

There have been significant advances in brain science in recent years including better mapping of which parts of the brain are responsible for different functions. Our primitive brain, the limbic system, is very powerful because it is primitive - it is responsible for our very survival. The fight or flight or freeze response is activated in the limbic system, and it is where our emotional memory is stored - especially the memory of fear. As such, anything that reminds us of fearful experiences can trigger a strong fear response even though the fear is not justified by the external reality. Therefore fear responses come quickly and become a bad habit. The limbic system is what I refer to as the feeling brain whereas the more recently evolved prefrontal cortex is the part of our brain that allows us to think rationally, not simply react emotionally, and is the part of the brain I refer to as the thinking brain.

To retrain your brain and turn down/turn off the feeling brain and turn up/turn on the thinking brain when struggling with obsessions, compulsions or chronic worries and fears, you need to learn and use the following 3 step method:

The “1-2-3” method:

The 1-2-3 method is a very powerful and condensed use of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy that activates the circular relationship between thinking and behavior. The goal of 1-2-3 is to actively engage and empower the thinking brain to reduce the power of the feeling brain and modify our behavioral response. This method is a blueprint for CBT and guides you through the steps required to reduce automatic feeling responses and increase rational responses. This leads to greater peace of mind and feeling of self-control.

STEP 1: LABEL

When you are experiencing anxiety the first thing required is to be able to recognize and label what you are experiencing. You need to label it, for example, say to yourself, “This is just my anxiety”, or “This is my fear habit again”, or “This is me catastrophizing again” or “This is my what-if thinking habit again”. This is very powerful because it is you now having a rational thought about the automatic fearful feeling and thought. It automatically is activating more of your thinking brain to have a clear thought about

what you are experiencing - a clear thought about the silly thought. I compare this to the first step in AA and the 12 step programs - being able to recognize and accept one's addiction. There are many labels that you can use, including:

- This is an obsession
- This is a compulsion
- This is my OCD
- This is my hypochondriasis
- This is my worry addiction

STEP 2: DEVALUE

In this step you "talk back to the fear" with rational ideas that help to devalue and discredit the original fearful thought and feeling. You rationally and realistically tell yourself facts as to how the fear is not as significant as your feeling state tells you it is. You remind yourself of facts such as:

- These fears never actually happen
- I always exaggerate these things
- If something like this did happen I know I can handle it
- I have handled frightening situations in the past
- I don't ever truly lose control of myself

STEP 3. REFOCUS

This is the most important step and change won't occur until you can shift your thoughts and attention from the intrusive thought and resist doing what the feeling brain wants. This step is completely different from the typical distraction that everybody with anxiety attempts because you had not sufficiently discredited the fearful threat to allow distraction to work. Here you have reduced the belief in the threat to a degree sufficient enough to allow yourself to shift focus. Things to do to refocus include:

- Breathe
- Shift attention to the present moment (be present in the present)
- Think about and/or do something pleasant or pleasurable (the more positive it is, the more effective it is)
- Focus on your reality - where you are, who you are with, what you are doing - the more engaged you become with others, the more your attention will be redirected.
- The more active the new activity, the more it will refocus you and generate different neural activity.

The effect of doing the 1-2-3 is that it begins to reduce the habit of automatic surrender to fear and begins to develop a new good habit of separating from and reducing the power of fear. It is difficult because it requires conscious effort while the fearful feelings and thoughts come automatically. But with conscious effort it can be done and helps to retrain the brain. By activating new thoughts, behaviors and feelings in response to an old stimuli, you are actually changing your brain's functioning. You increase activity in the prefrontal cortex (thinking brain) and decrease hyperactivity in the limbic system (feeling brain). As with all habits, they are self-reinforcing. The more they're performed

the more they will be performed. The new good thinking and feeling habit will come quicker and with less effort the more they are performed.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. Spend only a little time on #1 and #2 - you don't want to spend too much time with the content of your fear - it only gives it more energy or power.
2. Spend a lot of time, the rest of your time ideally, on #3 - refocused on something else - positive, in the present, and even better if it involves another person. You need to do something else to shift mental gears. Use it or lose it - the less time you spend thinking about the fear the less you deepen the obsessive brain circuit.
3. Remember - it's not what you feel when pushing away from the obsessive thought or compulsive urge - it's what you do. The struggle is not to make the feeling go away but to not give in to the feeling.
4. Also - this takes hard work, over time - but it can lead to new brain circuits.