

Session 10: assumptions and experiments

Human beings in modern society are required to process large amounts of information in a short space of time and to make snap judgements based on underlying assumptions about ourselves, other people and the world. This ability has enabled human beings with our unique intelligence in the animal world to anticipate, plan and act in ways that lead to huge achievements. But our assumptions are not always accurate and sometimes when we act on an untested assumption as if it were true it can cause us great difficulties.

For example, if I believe people are judgmental and critical I might assume that people won't find me interesting, or will only want to know me if I'm cheerful all the time. This assumption will affect my behaviour: I might then avoid talking to someone I don't know well, or letting someone who cares about me know how I really feel. This in turn will have consequences for how people will treat me in return. If I avoid telling my best friend that I feel really down then I might end up feeling hurt and rejected when they don't seem to notice.

These assumptions are often acquired during childhood from parents, teachers, and the media. They are sometimes known as Rules For Living because they are a guide to how we assume life works. Having rigid Rules for Living can make you more vulnerable to depression because they reduce your flexibility to respond to difficult events in a helpful way. Your coping behaviour, which is a response to the assumptions you're making, may make the situation you're in less tolerable. For example, if you fear being abandoned, and assume that if you say 'no' to an unreasonable demand you will be rejected, then you may not learn to deal assertively with stresses that could trigger depression.

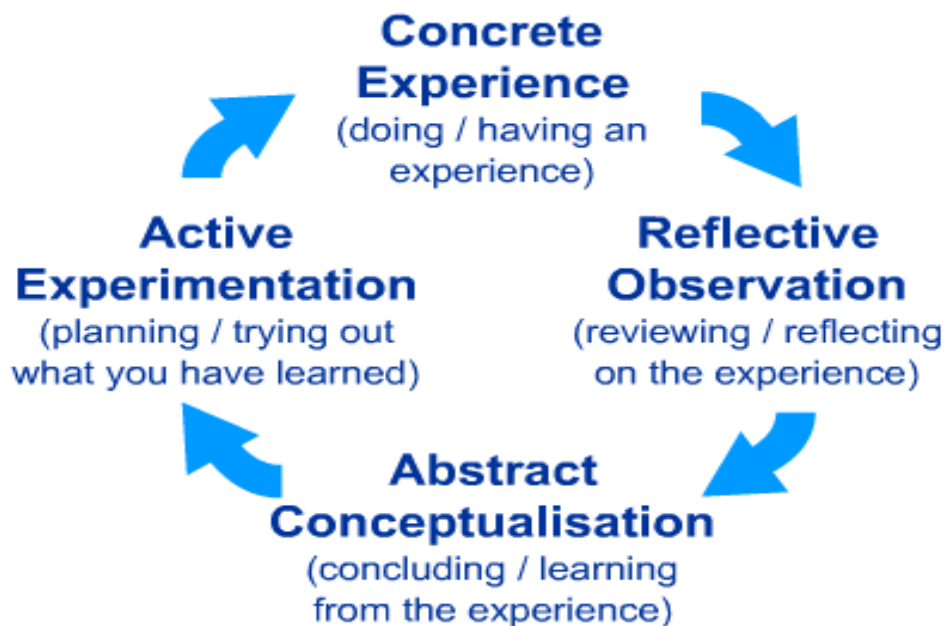
Once we have learned rules to make sense of the world we develop behaviour to cope with it. Some styles of behaviour that can be helpful in some circumstances can work against us when circumstances change. These styles are typically: *attack*, *avoid*, and *try harder*. *Attack* is an aggressive attempt to fight off anything that might threaten our self-esteem; *Avoid* is the strategy of burying one's head in the sand; *Trying harder* is the strategy of banging your head against a brick wall.

Some examples of beliefs and assumptions, and ways in which we might respond in unhelpful ways, are given below. Remember these are just examples - your own rules, assumptions, behaviour and consequences are unique.

Belief or rule	Assumption	Coping behaviour	Consequence
Abandonment: it would be terrible to be rejected, criticised, abandoned or alone	If I don't do what people want they will leave me or hurt me	Always agree to requests, even when I don't want to	Feel resentful, worn out and put-upon
Perfectionism: I must always try to be perfect	If something is not perfect then it is worthless	Pay great attention to tiny detail	Remain unhappy with your achievements
Mistrust: other people are untrustworthy or unreliable	If I let people get close they will take advantage of me	Don't disclose anything personal	Feel bitter
Emotional deprivation: no one understands me	If I express a need it will not get met	Put on a 'brave face'	Feel hurt and misunderstood
Social exclusion: I don't fit in	If I try to join in I will be rejected	Don't offer an opinion, avoid offers to socialise	Feel lonely
Dependence: I can't manage on my own	If I try to do something new it will go wrong	Ask people for help with simple tasks	Continue to feel incompetent and helpless
Vulnerability: I am vulnerable to harm	If anything bad happened I would never cope	Avoid anything that seems risky	Feel scared and anxious
Grandiosity: I know best	If it doesn't get done my way it won't get done properly	Take control of tasks, refuse to delegate	Feel exhausted, undervalued, and in conflict with people
Entitlement: I must always get what I want	If I don't get what I want I won't be able to stand the frustration	Make unreasonable demands	Feel hurt or confused when others avoid you
Blaming: other people are to blame for my problems	If something goes wrong it's someone else's responsibility	Be critical and complain	Fail to learn to take responsibility for oneself
Shame: It is shameful to appear weak or needy	If people can see that I am not coping they will despise me	Carry on trying to cope on my own	Feel exhausted and stressed
Defectiveness: deep down I am flawed and defective	If anyone really got to know me I would be exposed as a fraud	Blame myself and beat myself up	Feel self-loathing

In depression our assumptions tend to be negative, just like the rest of our thinking. We also tend to have less energy or tolerance for new ideas and that can lead us to trace out old familiar ways of acting based on outdated and untested assumptions. In short, depression can stop us from learning.

There is an important and useful way to think about how we learn from experience called the Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle. Here it is in a diagrammatic form:



In Kolb's model learning is not something that starts and ends in a dusty schoolroom; it is a lifelong process of engaging in activities, reflecting on the experience, learning from them, and then trying something new.

We want to encourage you to notice how since coming to this group you have already started to do this again. How by setting goals, breaking them down into small steps, scheduling those steps, and then learning from what went well and what didn't, you are already re-engaged in an important experiential learning process.

As we've pointed out there are two key questions that CBT asks us to ask ourselves: is there another more useful way to look at (think about) things, and, is there something else I could do that would be more helpful?

We now want to add a third question:

What have I learned?

It could be argued that this is the most important question of all because it is the one that ties together changes in how we think and changes in what we do. In fact we might even argue that it's not possible to change what you do without changing how you think. Nor is it possible to truly change how you think without doing something different as a consequence.

So if you have made any changes in what you do or how you think then you are already learning how to deal with depression. What we'd like you to do now is to apply a particular way of learning from experience. We call this way of learning behavioural experiments.

Before we do that though it might be worth thinking about the assumptions you made before coming to this group. Make a list below of all the assumptions you made and then in the next column write what you now know. Here's an example to help you get started: Doug filled in the table as follows:

Assumption	What I now know
<i>I assumed I would be the only one to feel this way</i>	<i>Lots of other people feel the same even though their lives are very different to mine - it makes me feel less lonely</i>
<i>I assumed it wasn't worth trying to do anything differently</i>	<i>I found that doing small things really does make a difference</i>
<i>I assumed that if I said anything people would laugh at me or think I was stupid</i>	<i>I found that other people were really sympathetic and take a genuine interest in me and how I am</i>
<i>I assumed that I couldn't be helped</i>	<i>I'm really surprised to find that in small ways things are starting to change</i>

Now have a go yourself:

Assumption	What I now know

Now that you've written down how some of your assumptions turned out not to be true, how about designing an experiment to test out another assumption? First you need to identify an important belief that is leading to behaviour that has a negative impact on your life. Think of the belief as an assumption so that you can predict what will happen. If you think people are critical and unfriendly, for example, the assumption might be 'If I talk to someone I don't know they will ignore me'.

Then you design a small experiment to test it. You make predictions about what would happen if the theory is true. Then you try to identify any obstacles to testing out the experiment and ways to overcome them. Finally you set a time and place to carry out the experiment. Afterwards you ask yourself: 'how well did the result fit with my expectations and what have I learned as a consequence'. Then you ask yourself: 'given what I've learned, what would I like to do next?'

We have a handout for you to help you to design and record experiments. Here's how it looked when Petra tried it:

Belief to be tested: *'I'm a hopeless cook'*

Assumption: *'If I try to cook something new I'll make a mess of it'*

Experiment: *'Find a recipe for paella as I enjoyed it on holiday a few years ago and I'd like to be able to cook it myself'*

Prediction: *'It'll taste disgusting and I'll have to throw it away'*

Obstacle: *'I won't have the ingredients and I won't feel like going out to get them'*

Solution: *'Look up the recipe before my regular supermarket shopping trip and write down the ingredients'*

Outcome: *'It wasn't as bad as I expected for a first go, I think I know how to improve it next time'*

What I've learned: *'If I plan ahead and prepare properly I can learn to do new things and make them work reasonably well'*

Next step: *'Have a friend over and cook her paella'*

For Adam he chose to test out his belief that even if he looked for a new job there would be nothing he was interested in or qualified to do.

Belief: *'I'll never find another job'*

Assumption: *'If I look for a job I won't find anything I can apply for and no one can help me'*

Experiment: *'Go through the job pages of the paper and write down the details of any jobs I might be qualified to apply for'*

Prediction: *'If I look in the paper at the library there won't be a single job I could apply for'*

Obstacles: *'I won't feel like it, it'll make me feel worse'*

Solution: *'Go to the library and get out a DVD and then take half an hour to look through the paper'*

Outcome: *'There were no jobs I thought were suitable but I did see an advert for volunteers to work at an animal shelter'*

What I've learned: *'It's true there weren't any suitable jobs around that day but at least I got down to the library and had a look. I'd be interested in working with animals one day, so perhaps I could volunteer at the weekend and maybe meet some like-minded people'*

Next step: *'Email the charity looking for volunteers and ask for more details; talk to an employment advisor'*

As you can see from our examples, it is often not necessarily the direct outcome of the experiment that is as important as the fact of trying something new and being open to possibility.

Think about the assumptions you make and what you take for granted – how could you test out one of your beliefs?

Try using our behavioural experiment worksheet and come and tell us how you get on.

Until we meet next week 'Good Luck'

Testing out your expectations by doing an experiment

Thought to be tested:

Experiment	Prediction	Possible problems	Strategies to overcome problems	Outcome of experiment	How well does the outcome support the thought that was tested? (0-100%)

What have I learned from this experiment?