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Think Outside The Box

Published on *Explorable.com* (<https://explorable.com>)

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When approaching an event that makes us feel nervous, it certainly occurs in our minds and bodies. Not only our feelings but our behavior as well, is under the influence of our perceptions.

The way in which we think about the event, ourselves and our abilities to perform predetermines our emotions, and therefore our behavioral patterns. In this current context, the event is public speaking, which we start to contemplate long before the actual occurrence.

The banner features the Explorable logo at the top center. Below it, three quiz cards are displayed in a row. The first card shows a pair of red roller skates on a wooden deck, with the text 'Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2'. The second card shows a fan of colorful pens, also with the text 'Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2'. The third card shows a Ferris wheel at sunset, with the text 'Quiz: Flags in Europe'. To the right of the cards is a button that says 'See all quizzes =>'.

Thinking about Public Speaking

Certain events, such as public speaking, can be perceived, by some people, as more stressful than others. If you feel nervous about public speaking, you may tend to think about it in advance, and come up with all sorts likely and unlikely scenarios. Cognitive distortions play an influential role in these scenarios and doesn't take long before we start to feel afraid, confused and doubtful.

The Model of Events, Beliefs, and Reactions

There is a model derived from Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) that explains the way important events, our thoughts, emotions, and behavior are connected. It is commonly known as the ABC model. Here's the explanation of how it works:

A - stands for Activating Event. It represents the event that leads us to a particular response. When this event is important, either in a negative or a positive way, we have a strong reaction to it.

B - Is for Beliefs. They consist our thoughts, including cognitive distortions, about the event (A), but also about ourselves, other people and the world in general. In other words, this category includes all of our core beliefs, which we have formed as early as childhood, and the thoughts that are derived from those beliefs. It is important to remember that the content of our beliefs and thoughts is often subconscious.

C - Describes Consequences, in the terms of the thoughts and feelings we have, as well as the behaviors we engage in, as a reaction.

This Model Is Dynamic

Activating event (A) influences beliefs (B), and beliefs (B) lead to consequences (thoughts, feelings, and behavior - C). But, that's not all, because these three aspects are interconnected: each of them influences the other two.

How Does It Look, in Reality?

For example, let's imagine that there was a specific time in your life when you were about to perform in front of an audience, and you thought, "Oh my God, I'm so terrible at public speaking". That thought led you to feel anxious, afraid or desperate to escape from the event. As a result, your performance was bad, and you confirmed your belief (that you are a lousy public speaker). Now that you have validated what once was a fleeting thought, next time you have to speak in public, similar thoughts, emotions and behavioral pattern will become activated. As a result, it is likely that you will be even more afraid of the forthcoming event. In this way, the problem gradually intensifies and has an increasingly detrimental effect on both your performance and other important aspects of your well-being. You may start to lose your self-confidence, become distressed and seek avoidance.

ABC in Action

This is the example of the ABC model that have an adverse outcome:

A - You have to present your project publicly, to your classmates and your professor.

B - You think within cognitive distortions such as overgeneralization: "I will be horrible in presenting this and from now on everyone will think that I'm stupid" and let's add some catastrophizing: "That would be the worst nightmare coming true, and there's nothing I can do about it!"

C - As a result, you feel frightened and helpless. When the event occurs, your voice is trembling, your hands are shaking, and you are terrified by the fact that everyone can see how

afraid you are. You start to make mistakes, forget to mention the important parts of your presentation and feel like you are going to pass out.

Now, with this or similar B and C, imagine how you would be inclined to feel during your next public event.

Try the Constructive Alternative

If we know that these B's and C's aren't helpful, what can we do? Well, we can focus on our B - beliefs. You already know how you can identify your unhelpful thoughts and what you can do about them.

Let's see how your ABC can be different, more flexible and constructive if you apply what you have already learned about thoughts:

A - The activating event is same - you are fast approaching public speech.

B - This is the most important aspect. Instead of using irrational cognitive distortions, such as generalization and catastrophizing, let's try with a rational, mindful, and self-compassionate alternative: "I don't feel comfortable with public speaking. Perhaps I perceive it as more challenging than other people do. However, I am not "other people". I am who I am, and it's perfectly fine to be afraid. I may not be perfect in all aspects of life, but I am strong enough to do things even when they are hard for me."

C - As a result, instead of being stuck with overwhelming anxiety, you may be afraid to the extent which would allow you to expose yourself to public speaking. You would know feel more comfortable with accepting your feelings and being in touch with them while trying to improve, but not judge yourself. It is highly likely that you will look and feel calmer, despite the fear, which now has less of an impact on your behavior.

How Can That Happen?

Overcoming fear and anxiety of public speaking is a process that requires time, energy and commitment. At the end of that process, you shouldn't expect your negative feelings to have vanished. Remember, being a bit nervous sometimes is a normal part of the human experience. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between being slightly uneasy, and feeling afraid to the extent that has a harmful effect on yourself and your future. Your expectations of this process are also important, as they too follow the ABC model, just like everything else in life.

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