

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Emunah

By: Leah Lee R. Adams, PsyD

Cognitive Behavioral Therapies (particularly Rational Living Therapy developed by Aldo Pucci, PhD) are a compilation of psychotherapies based on the premise that our thoughts/and or beliefs, not our situations, lead to our behavior and feelings. A classic example of this is found in the children's book "What's under my bed?" by James Stevenson (Yes, my articles do always find their way into the juvenile section of the library). A child hears a noise and is terrified. In reality, it is not the noise that causes the fear, but rather the belief about what the sound means (obviously a monster). The fear results from the child (or grownup) letting their imagination run away with them, not actually from the noise itself.

We will get more technical momentarily but, as soon as we return to examples from daily life, you will see how simple this becomes. In RLT the process involving thoughts and feelings is broken down into ABC. "A" represents what we aware of, what is going on in our lives. "B" represents what our belief is about that of which we are now aware. "C" represents the consequences (feeling or behavior) that we experience based on our beliefs. Using Cognitive Behavioral techniques in therapy, we help individuals and couples change some of their "B" into healthier, less distorted beliefs thus resulting in more positive "C"s.

To illustrate, let's pick an example that many of us can relate to, the car that won't start. In this example the non-starting car is our "A". You may have jumped to the conclusion that our "C", feelings about this situation, are anger and frustration. Hold on there. We are each individuals and we process our experiences differently. Therefore, my "C" might be different than yours. I might even be happy that my car won't start! How, you ask? Let's go back to the "B" step, the step where my beliefs affect how I respond to the reality of the situation ("A"). Your belief might be, since my car won't start

I'll be late to work and the boss will be angry. . . so therefore I feel ("C") stressed and miserable. My belief might be, since my car won't start I have a legitimate excuse not to run around now and I so I'll have more time to spend with my children. . . so therefore I feel ("C") happy!

I recently presented these ideas at the RCDC senior program. (It's a great program that provides transportation, lunch, camaraderie and stimulating entertainment to senior women of our area.) After presenting the theory, I opened the floor to all of the participants. It was fascinating to see how the same situation ("A") could elicit such different feelings ("C"). As this is the season of Yomim Tovim the question posed was 'How does Yom Tov make you feel?' Responses ranged from depressed to happy. We then went back to analyze each respondent's belief ("B") about Yom Tov. One who responded "happy" clarified that she feels happy because she has already begun to prepare and she believes this is good. One who responded "anxious" clarified that she feels so because she anticipates the enormous amount of work necessary to prepare for Yom Tov and believes that this will tire her out.

Interestingly, one of the women had both positive *and* negative feelings associated with Yom Tov. Her situation ("A") was the same, the approaching Yom Tov, yet she had two different beliefs ("B"), each resulting in different feelings ("C"). On the one hand, she was sparked to remember her deceased relatives who could no longer celebrate with her. This led to her feeling sad. On the other hand, Yom Tov sparked her to remember her relatives that are alive with whom she would get to spend more time. This led to her to feel excited. You see, reality is not as it is but as we *see* it. (That bit of wisdom is from none other than a refrigerator magnet.) There is a Yiddish phrase that echoes this thought, "Meer zeyen nisht k'an zachn azoy vee *zay* zenen, meer zeyen zachn azoy *meer* zenen" We don't see things the way *they* are; we see things the way *we* are. (Thanks to Chaim Werdyger from "A Taste of Yiddish" e-mails).

At the seminar I attended taught by Dr. Pucci an interesting question was raised by a fellow therapist. The question was about a client who was miserable about following some religious ritual. Following the RLT approach that he espouses, he explained something that can help so many of us with our religious pursuits. Since RLT and CBT translate issues into rational arguments he came out with the following: If, in fact, the client was following the religious ritual that they feel is expected of them (albeit difficult) then the person should be happy that they are serving the One Above as they think they should! Again, it's not the act of self-sacrifice that causes sadness or satisfaction; it's the *belief* one has about doing it. What an amazing thought. The work I do to get ready for Yom Tov (and that really adds up) can be my greatest joy if only I view it as such.

Emunah is a system of belief that helps us deal with all of the "A's in our lives. Once we recognize that Hashem controls all of our situations ("A") in life, we no longer have to worry about attempting to control them. We only have to work on how we perceive ("B") of the situations in our lives. Certainly a belief ("B") that the most powerful omniscient and kind being is in charge will lead us to positive thoughts and behaviors.

A friend of mine, who is a tremendous Baalas Emunah herself, recently sent me an article called: *The Art of Making the Impossible Possible* by Rabbi Avrohom Birnbaum (Yated Ne'eman, September 9, 2011.) In it Rabbi Birnbaum describes the harrowing experience of being trapped by Hurricane Irene without adequate food rations. He reflects that some people in the group, believing that Irene was insurmountable, sat weakened with dismay. Others, he noted, believed this to be a great opportunity to do chesed, and were energized with excitement. "The basic working premise that my newfound Satmar friends displayed as soon as the problem crystallized was 'There is a solution to the problem'. End of sentence. We will solve the problem with Hashem's help the question is only how. . ." By believing that our situation does not have to lead to a particular feeling; by believing that with some attitude

adjustment we can change our feelings; by believing that these changes can motivate us to deal with our situations and relationships differently, we have the power to change our world for the good.

Dr. Leah Lee R. Adams, PsyD is a Psychologist
in private practice in the Monsey area.
She accepts several insurances, including Medicare
and can be reached at 845-661-8741
for speaking engagements and appointments.
In addition, she loves readers' feedback at
DrLeahAdams@gmail.com!

This article appeared in "The Front Page Magazine" on October 11, 2011.