

How can I find hope when my situation is hopeless?

A ship should not ride on a single anchor, nor life on a single hope.

Epictetus, Greek Philosopher

Nearly 2000 years ago, Epictetus recognized the physical danger risked by traveling on a ship unprepared for all the various challenges and possibilities of a long journey at sea. He used that example as a metaphor to make his main point...it is psychologically and spiritually dangerous to travel through ones life without being able to recognize that there are many possibilities!

If ones focus is too microscopic and based upon only one hope, one desire, one dream, one expectation...it is likely one will miss all the other wonderful opportunities life offers. There is the chance all the other hopes and desires we might have had for our lives are ignored because we are consumed by just one goal or expectation. What is even more likely is we **dismiss** possibilities, though recognized, because we believe they are pointless (or even impossible) if we cannot be assured of obtaining our primary goal. To use the Epictetus metaphor, one might get "shipwrecked" along the way!

Often, our client's interpretation of circumstances, and not necessarily the circumstances themselves, cause them to get shipwrecked - stuck, depressed and convinced that their situation is hopeless. Many times, I will use the following story (or a similar scenario) to illustrate the basic principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). We will often use the story as a frame of reference in future sessions. I offer this as a reminder of the beautiful simplicity of CBT and how we might use the model for our clients and for ourselves when we feel overwhelmed.

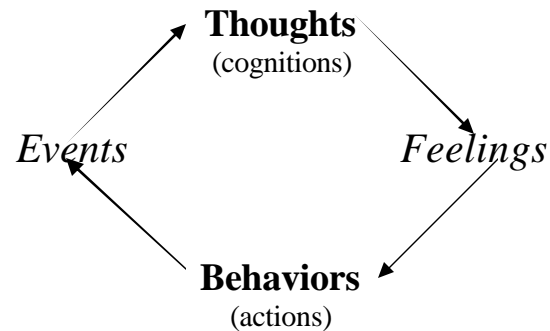
Take the following event as an example (Bush, 2002). A friend is due to meet you for dinner at your house at 7:30. But it's now past 8:00, and there's been no sign of her - not even a phone call. What will you think, feel and do about this? Remember, there is only one event!

What you think	How you feel	What you do
"She might have been hurt on the way here."	Worried or anxious	Call hospital ERs to find out if she's there
"She didn't bother to let me know she was delayed."	Annoyed or angry	Chew her out, or act chilly, if she does show up
"It doesn't matter to me if people are on time."	Indifferent	Nothing in particular
"I needed the time to fix the house up anyway."	Relieved	Relax and enjoy the extra time
"I am insignificant and not worthy of companionship"	Sad or depressed	Stay isolated and feel sorry for yourself

As this table of responses clearly illustrates, there is more than one possible belief, feeling and response to the situation. These differences are based upon perceptions and beliefs that are not necessarily accurate - we still do not know why our friend is late.

It is important to note the relationship among events, thinking, feeling and doing. The way we feel (both physically and emotionally) can affect what we think and what we do, and what we do

affects how we think and feel. It is equally important to appreciate the relationships between events and feelings (which we can't directly control) and thoughts and behaviors (which we can control). Thus the name – Cognitive Behavioral Therapy!



The following are some suggestions, mostly based on CBT, for our clients when they are stuck:

1. (Thinking) Be careful that your interpretation of events is completely accurate. *Note- If your thinking could be described as “all or nothing”, you are probably not being objective or completely honest with yourself.
2. (Thinking) Think outside the box! Look at other possibilities. Do not allow one central idea corrupt all other ideas. Use the example and diagram above to help you.
3. (Feeling) Give yourself permission to feel awful sometimes. It is perfectly normal and even healthy to feel bad when bad things are happening. However, at some point, remember that the way you feel may actually cause you to misinterpret some things. Re-evaluate!
4. (Doing) If you are not doing anything...**DO SOMETHING!!** If what you are doing is not working for you...**DO SOMETHING ELSE!!** Believe that doing can affect feeling which affects thinking and so on.
5. (Doing) Ask for help if you get stuck. It is wise and appropriate (and a sure sign of personal strength) to seek help when we get so stuck we cannot be proactive. Seeking help **IS** proactive! Utilize positive support systems found in religious faith, friends, peers, family, counselors and medical professionals.
6. (Thinking, Feeling, Doing) Remember that it can be difficult to overcome inflexible thinking, overwhelming emotion and unhealthy behaviors. Take it slow. Utilize your strengths and minimize any weaknesses. Mostly.... **THINK – FEEL – DO!!!**

The original question was – “How can I find hope when my situation is hopeless?” I’ll tell you what - Let’s rephrase the question in a cognitive behavioral way:

What can I **DO** to **FEEL** hopeful when I **THINK** my situation is hopeless?

Finally, I opened with a quote, so I will close with another 2000-year-old quote from our old friend Epictetus:

"The thing that upsets people is not what happens but what they think it means."

Think about “what it means”!

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Bush, J.W. (2002). www.cognitive-behavior-therapy.org. Retrieved 07/01/02.