

The stand-back strategy

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Purpose

The purpose of this exercise is to provide the client with a strategy for managing unwanted instant emotional reactions.

Description

When facing difficult situations, this strategy enables the client to develop ways of disengaging from unwanted emotions and associated unhelpful behaviours by providing what could be described as a ‘circuit breaker’, allowing the client to replace the self-defeating emotion and associated behaviour with that of a more self-enhancing nature.

Process

The individual is asked to imagine a situation that has already taken place where s/he experienced an unwanted and self-defeating emotional reaction such as becoming angry. The client then engages in the following process.

The client is asked to go back to the situation s/he has chosen and to remember what actually happened at the time. The coach asks the client to fully engage with the experience by asking the client to describe what s/he was feeling emotionally as well as experiencing physically (for example, how the client’s body felt at the time, hot/cold, stomach feeling in knots, etc.).

The coach then asks the client to remember the point

just before s/he acted in a self-defeating manner. When the client is able to do this, the coach asks the client to remember the feelings (physical and emotional) that led up to this point and to think of these as 'early warning signals' that can alert the client in future situations to when s/he is in danger of engaging in unhelpful responses.

The client is then asked to take a slow, deep breath in through their nose and is asked to let it out slowly through the mouth and to count to five in his/her mind on the out-breath, while at the same time visualizing a calming picture or image – this can be any image the client finds calming.

Following this, the client is asked to speak more slowly and provide a statement or comment that would have been more appropriate to deal with the situation.

Once the client has completed the strategy successfully, s/he is asked to undertake this exercise again using two different situations. To ensure that the strategy becomes embedded, the client is asked to undertake the exercise as often as possible as a homework activity.

Pitfalls

This exercise should only be used for those situations where the client's unwanted behaviour is not extreme in nature. To ascertain the severity of unwanted behaviour, the client is asked to rate the degree of emotion experienced on a scale of 0–10 (0 = no emotion and 10 = extreme emotion). If the emotion experienced is rated as 7 or above, this exercise may not be effective as the situation in question may be too challenging for the client at this time. If this is the case, the client is asked to think of a situation where his/her unwanted emotional reaction rates as a 6 or less. If the client can find such situations and can practise this exercise successfully, this will, over time, assist those situations currently rated by the client as 7 or above to become more manageable as the individual will have built up a set of useful coping skills to allow him/her to deal with more challenging situations more effectively.

Bibliography

Bernard, M. E. and Wolfe, J. L. (1993) *The RET Resource Book for Practitioners*, New York, NY: Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy.