



Values and CBT

People are often defined by their values. Looking at values from a cognitive-behavioral perspective can illustrate how values can drive thinking, feelings and behavior. CBT in its most basic format tells us:

THINKING (effects our) → FEELINGS (which effects our) → BEHAVIOR

This is an extremely simplistic view of CBT. Often this chain of events can go in different directions with feelings affecting thoughts and behaviors affecting feelings and back and forth in various combinations. However, as stated earlier, many fundamental day-to-day situations we face directly follow the **Thinking > Feeling > Behavior** CBT pattern in the above diagram. Consider some basic, easy to follow examples of this process:

1. Thought – “Look at that billboard with that delicious looking picture of a cheeseburger”
2. Feeling – “I am getting *hungry*”
3. Behavior – Pull over car at the next rest stop and get a big juicy burger and fries

1. Thought – “I can’t believe how overwhelming work was today”
2. Feeling(s) – Stress, anxiety, frustration
3. Behavior – Go to the bar after work to have a few beers to try and relax

1. Thought – “Everything I try seems to fail”
2. Feeling(s) – Discouragement, frustration, depression
3. Behavior – Choose to isolate socially - Lack of effort made to improve situation

There is another element in this chain when it comes to cognitive behavioral therapy. Our thoughts are highly influenced by our *values*. We tend to think the most about what is most important to us. Therefore, it is not really our thoughts alone that end up triggering various feelings and then behaviors. Our values truly explain a lot about who we are and what we focus on and what we do. So from a CBT perspective, our values often precede, then activate our thoughts. Consider a few examples: When someone highly values career advancement, for example, that person usually spends a great deal of time thinking about their training, education, employment and overall career goals. It is likely that this person who has strong career values therefore dedicates a lot of time, focus and effort on work, thus making his or her career a priority. The same would be true for someone who highly values family; most of that person’s time, thoughts and focus would be on spending time with and caring for his or her family. To a large degree we essentially become our values. This same concept is true when someone values drugs, sports, sex, and many other subjects one may value. Our thoughts, feelings and behaviors can frequently be traced back to our personal values as the source.



Therefore, when considering the influence of values from a cognitive behavioral perspective, our earlier basic diagram about thinking, feeling and behaving should instead look like this:

VALUES → THINKING → FEELINGS → BEHAVIOR

Our values trigger our thoughts which then influences our feelings which then results in certain behaviors. An excellent illustration of this process is outlined in the “Chocolate Cake” example from the 2013 Book – *Taking the Escalator: An Alternative to the 12 Steps*

The Chocolate Cake –

Suppose there were a room full of people gathered for some purpose that had nothing to do with eating. At a point in the meeting, imagine that someone unexpectedly brings out a large chocolate cake and hands everyone a slice, encouraging them to enjoy it. How might people in the room react?

The most common reaction would be a sense of joy and appreciation, resulting in the simple action of taking the cake, then eating and enjoying the unexpected treat.

However, suppose someone in the room was struggling with food addiction and they had just spent the whole day eating salad and health food according to their dietary allowance. This person is going to the gym right after the meeting like they do every other day. Suppose that chocolate was one of this persons identified weaknesses as they can remember many food binges started by a strong craving for chocolate. How might this person react to the same piece of chocolate cake?

Obviously the person struggling with food addiction is going to feel differently than we had originally guessed people would react to the cake. Although this individual may appreciate the person’s well intended kindness and generosity for sharing the cake, it would be understandable for this person to view that piece of cake sitting in front of them with contempt, even looking at the cake itself as an enemy to their progress. The person may even initially be annoyed with the person who is sharing the cake for putting a potential stumbling block in their way. This person would realize that, at this point in their change process, that cake could be a huge setback. Therefore, guided by the intense motivation the person quickly steps back from the table and utters an assertive “No Thank You!” Later, as this motivated individual is at the gym that evening, there is an extra feeling of gratitude and pride for not eating any of the cake.





The Chocolate Cake example clearly illustrates how one's values directly influences thoughts which in turn impacts feelings then ultimately one's behavior. In this example, the value one individual had for health transcended the value another person may have had for simply eating and enjoying a delicious piece of cake. Again, it all starts with our values. To further illustrate, think about how your values affect your decisions and behavior by reviewing the following example for thought below again considering money as an area of value:

Money is a commonly held value in today's society. Being as honest with yourself as possible: *How does the value that you personally place on money affect your thoughts, focus, choices, attitude and behavior?*

- For example, are you a saver or spender?
- How willing are you to go into debt to have nice things?
- Do you tend to purchase brand names which cost more or go for cheaper alternatives?
- Do you choose to work less and have more free time or work more and have a larger income?
- What role does financial stability hold in your choice of relationship partners and friends?
- To what degree are you willing to bend the rules or stretch the truth when money is involved?
- When you know someone is extremely wealthy how might that affect your behavior toward that person?
- Does financial generosity with others come easy to you or is it a struggle?
- To what degree do you spend time worrying about your financial situation?
- If you have children, how important is it to you that they one day have a high-paying job?

These are just self-awareness questions for thought to illustrate how our values in one area can strongly influence our thinking, feeling and behavior. Also, these questions show the variation with which our own personal sense of value specifically can influence our choices.

Returning to the main point of values as a tool in counseling it is critical to understand that to be effective in using engagement skills it is necessary to condition and sharpen your **“values radar”** In other words, we as counselors need to remain in tune to our client's values similar to the way a honeybee can search out a flower or a sonar can find a sunken ship or a metal detector can locate a lost coin. Our client's values are like a key to opening the doorway of effective communication especially when that doorway is locked by some form of resistance. Therefore it is important to consistently practice viewing our client's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in terms of their personal values which will enhance our overall understanding and advance the depth of the client-counselor relationship.

This leads us right into the next tool, **“[Taking an Interest](#)”** Once we get our clients sharing and discussing their values, it is essential we take a genuine interest and build upward from there.

