



Working with family violence based cognitive distortions

When working with cognitive distortions the following three step sequence provides a useful framework from which to respond:

1. **Understand and/or reframe what is being said**
2. **Make the perpetrator accountable or get some buy in**
3. **Move forward**

Below we examine two examples of distortions and how to respond using this three step framework. The assumption is that the clients making the distortions are all family violence perpetrators that have been violent towards their partners.

Example distortion 1

- *I can't even remember what happened because I was out of it on drugs*

Category - Denial of responsibility of the problem

Considerations - This distortion removes all accountability from the perpetrator and places the blame for being violent on the drugs. At this stage it would be very difficult to move forward while addressing the real issue of violence. Often when faced with a statement like this the key worker might choose to examine the perpetrators drug use which would ignore the underlying issue of their violence. While it may be useful to explore the perpetrators use of drugs at a later stage, exploring it at this stage redirects the focus away from violence and strengthens the perpetrators beliefs drugs are the real issue or reason for the violence.

Key workers response - Following the three step framework we could respond with a statement like this...

- *So what I'm hearing is that when you take drugs you become unsafe.*
- *What worries you most about being unsafe during these times?*
- *How interested would you be in looking at strategies to deal with similar situations if they come up again?*

Considerations - The above response is a fantastic example of how the three step framework can be applied. Let's examine how each step has been addressed:

1. **Step 1 - Understand and/or reframe what is being said.** Considering the fact that violence has occurred alongside the words "I can't even remember what happened" we have reframed the statement as "...when you take drugs you become unsafe."

Despite the fact that we are reinterpreting and rewording what the perpetrator has said it would be very hard for them to disagree that when they take drugs they become unsafe or make others unsafe. Especially given that they are here for family violence offending. By making this type of statement we also start to create some dissonance between what the perpetrator believes and how they have acted or behaved. Notice that this statement has also been made in a non-confrontational way. This is extremely important if we are to maintain an effective working relationship.

2. **Step 2 - Make the perpetrator accountable or get some buy in.** By understanding there are safety issues when drugs are involved and reframing what was originally said we have successfully removed the accountability from the drugs and placed it back on the perpetrator. By doing so we can now address the real issue of the perpetrator being unsafe. We have gained addition buy in to the idea of the perpetrator being unsafe by asking the question “what worries you most about being unsafe during these times?” This is a significant shift from where we were in that previously it was the drugs making the perpetrator unsafe, therefore the perpetrator could avoid responsibility for the problem.
3. **Step 3 - Move forward.** After the accountability has been put back on the perpetrator and we have gotten some buy in we can now look at addressing the real issue and moving forward. To do this the question “how interested would you be in looking at strategies to deal with similar situations if they come up again?” has been asked. By making the offender accountable and getting buy in we are now in a position to ask this question. Asking this question immediately after the distortion wouldn't have gotten a favourable response as at this point the perpetrator didn't see them as responsible for the problem.

Example distortion 2

- *She's the one with the problem. If she didn't nag at me so much none of this would've happened*

Category - Denial of the existence of a problem or extent of abuse

Considerations - This distortion serves to deny that there is a problem, at least with the perpetrator. The statement places the blame on the perpetrators partner and states that because she 'nags' it is her problem. At this stage there is no problem to move forward with because the perpetrator has removed all accountability from themselves and placed the blame on someone else. At this point the key worker could make the mistake of exploring the issue of 'nagging' and how the perpetrator responds by asking questions to clarify the statement. This however could give the perpetrator a chance to strengthen their position that it is the partner's issue. Although the key worker wouldn't intentionally want this to happen by asking about the partner and their 'nagging' they are in one way siding with the perpetrators views that this is in fact the problem.

Key workers response - Following the three step framework we could respond with a statement like this...

- *So what I'm hearing is that at times it's hard for you to handle your partner's requests?*
- *Obviously what's happening now isn't working. I'm interested in finding out, what would work for you?*

Considerations - The above response is another good example of how the three step framework can be applied. Let's examine how each step has been addressed:

1. **Step 1 - Understand and/or reframe what is being said.** The way the key worker has interpreted the distortion is that it's the perpetrator that finds it difficult to handle their partners requests. This was translated in the statement "So what I'm hearing is that at times it's hard for you to handle your partner's requests?" This statement still acknowledges the original but reframes it in a way that makes the offender accountable and not the partner. It may also be beneficial to give the partner/victim a voice by saying something like "it sounds like your partner has often got important things to tell you." This will start to address and reframe the perpetrators understanding of the term 'nagging' which is an unhelpful term as it discounts their partner's reality. Again this statement has been made in a non-confrontational way and allows the key worker to maintain a positive working relationship.
2. **Step 2 - Make the perpetrator accountable or get some buy in.** By reframing the original statement the key worker has now put the problem back on the perpetrator by suggesting that it is the way they react to 'nagging' rather than the 'nagging' itself that is the problem. Notice that the term nagging has also been replaced with the more neutral term requests. This helps to remove negative associations with the partner which also assists with shifting the accountability back to the perpetrator. The first part of the next statement "Obviously what's happening now isn't working..." also points out the fact that something has got to change and helps to get some buy in around resolving the issue.
3. **Step 3 - Move forward.** After the accountability has been put back on the perpetrator we can now look at addressing the real issue and moving forward. To do this the question "I'm interested in finding out, what would work for you?" has been asked. This question is an effective one in that it makes the perpetrator feel as if the key worker is genuine about wanting to help. It also maintains a power balance or working with approach as the key worker is asking them what would work rather than telling them.

Working with cognitive distortions activity

Now that we have explained how to work with cognitive distortions and looked at several examples it snow time for you to have a go at responding.

Below are some example distortions. There are several distortions under each category. The task requires you to choose one distortion from each category then consider and record your response. Remember the three step sequence when considering your responses

1. **Understand and/or reframe what is being said**
2. **Make the perpetrator accountable or get some buy in**
3. **Move forward**

Denial of the existence of a problem and/or the extent of the abuse

Choose one of the following statements to respond to...

- *There are many people much worse off than us*
- *She's got it good compared to others; at least I don't hit her*
- *I might have hit her but it was only a tap; it couldn't have hurt her*
- *What, me violent? I'm not the sort of bloke who is violent to women*
- *She's the one with the problem; she should be reading this book*
- *I can't remember anything of that night*
- *There are always two sides to any problem*

My chosen distortion =

My response

Denial of the significance of the problem

Choose one of the following statements to respond to...

- *I didn't hurt her*
- *We went to bed and made love just afterwards*
- *We argue a lot but that's a normal part of all relationships*
- *I just snapped; it was nothing really*
- *We've got a communication problem*
- *You're blowing this out of all proportion*
- *I can control myself*

My chosen distortion =

My response

Denial of responsibility for the problem

Choose one of the following statements to respond to...

- Her family is the problem, always interfering
- She asked for it
- You shouldn't have called me that
- She knows I don't like being talked back to
- If it wasn't for her friends we would be real happy
- I've been under a lot of stress lately
- I inherited my dad's temper
- I was born like this
- If she wasn't so verbal I wouldn't need to hit her
- I don't know what happened

My chosen distortion =

My response

Denial of the likelihood of abuse happening again

Choose one of the following statements to respond to...

- It won't happen again
- I've learnt my lesson this time
- I've promised her I'll be different
- It's all behind me now; I'm looking to the future
- I've found the Lord
- I've got a new job now and it's not as stressful

My chosen distortion =

My response

Get aware and get real about family violence and what you can do to help! Would you like to become more effective when working with family violence offenders and become an advocate for those who need help the most?

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