

The ABC Model

Alexander Draghici22.5K reads

Thoughts trigger emotions and vice versa. When it comes to depression, one negative emotion can profoundly influence our beliefs about ourselves, others or life. However, negative thoughts also lead to negative emotions.

By changing your dysfunctional thoughts and beliefs you can indirectly affect the way you feel. Out of all the tools used by therapists, one of the most effective is the ABC model. It's a comprehensive, easy-to-use technique that allows you to find better alternatives to replace your old, negative mindset.



The banner features the Explorable logo (a flask icon) and the text "EXPLORABLE Quiz Time!". Below the logo are three quiz cards: "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2" (with a pair of red roller skates), "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2" (with a fan of colored pencils), and "Quiz: Flags in Europe" (with a Ferris wheel). A "See all quizzes =>" link is located at the bottom right.

“A” Is for Activating Events

Activating events refer to the context in which a certain thought or emotion appears – the specific event that has triggered your thoughts and emotions.

These events can be both external – having to do with your environment, or internal – having to do just with your inner world. Either way, as you might have already guessed, it is not the objective event that leads to negative thoughts and emotions, but rather the way we interpret that event.

Activating events trigger your mind's information processing system, which in the case of depression is severely biased. It's like a broken filter, expelling junk and slime into your consciousness.

Why Is It Important?

Knowing the exact context in which your negative thoughts occur, provides you with another tool for coping with depression. When you know which events tend to trigger negative inner experiences, you would be able to take certain precautions, regarding those triggering events.

“B” Is for Beliefs

These are the cognitions (thoughts, beliefs, interpretations) that come between the activating event and the emotions it produces. In order to identify them, you have to ask yourself: “How do I see this event?” or “What are my emotions, regarding the event, telling me?”.

Uncovering Your Beliefs

What may sometimes be challenging to understand, is that thoughts always come before emotions, not the other way around. However, these thoughts pass through our minds so quickly, that we only see their reflection, in the form of emotions. However, asking ourselves questions helps discover these tricky thoughts.

Dysfunctional Beliefs

When depression becomes a constant in your life, your beliefs become negative and self-defeating. Not only do they lead to negative emotions, but they also affect your everyday actions and decisions.

This is the reason why most therapists label negative beliefs as dysfunctional. In other words, dysfunctional thoughts interfere with the abilities (e.g. decision-making, reasoning, etc.) that allow you to pursue goals and make decisions that lead towards happiness.

“C” Is for Consequences

Dysfunctional thoughts and beliefs lead to two types of consequences: emotional and behavioral. If, for instance, you believe that, “life is meaningless” (“B” for beliefs), you’ll probably end up feeling sad and depressed (“C” for emotional consequence). Furthermore, your behavior will be influenced by this stream of negativity.

If life seems meaningless (B) to you, then it is likely that you would feel demotivated and avoid engaging in activities that may be enjoyable or constructive. As you can see, a single thought is never isolated – it leads to emotions and behaviors, which can trigger a cycle of negativity, unless you stop them.

Change Is Possible

Out of all the elements that constitute the vicious cycle of depression, consequences may often be what hurts the most. But there’s always something you can do to improve! Just as your mind is capable of generating negativity, it can also create positive responses.

Challenging Negative Thinking

One powerful way to overcome the unpleasant consequences of negative thinking is by challenging your thoughts. Once you develop a positive way of thinking, which corresponds to reality, your emotions and behavior will also be more positive, reality-based and helpful.

In order to challenge your thoughts, you have to constantly test the validity of your beliefs and interpretations, specifically the ones associated with your depressive mood.

Thoughts Aren't Always Realistic

People who experience depression tend to blindly follow their beliefs, without considering that those negative thoughts may be a product of their own minds, rather than objective reality.

Sometimes, they're not even aware of the fact that some thoughts are utterly illogical. That's mainly because depression works on a subconscious level, thus avoiding the rigorous control of your conscious mind.

Shed a Light on Your Thoughts

The ABC model is specifically designed to put a spotlight on your negative thoughts by bringing them to the surface of your rational mind.

Once you identify a certain thought that leads to self-defeat, the next step is to replace it with a more rational, positive alternative.

The premise of the model can be summarized in one sentence - you have to both find proof that your negative thought is completely irrational, and come up with better ways to interpret reality.

Use the following worksheet to challenge your negative thinking:

A – activating event What happened? Where were you? Who were you with? What did you see, touch, smell, taste, hear?	B – negative thoughts or beliefs What was your first thought? How did you interpret the situation? Was there a certain image that popped into your mind?	C – consequences What experience? What?
My boss told me that I have to redo a task	“I suck at my job.” “I’m completely worthless.” “My boss will fire me.”	Sadness, disappointment, worthlessness. You may engage in self-harm or substance consumption after talking to a colleague or a loved one.

Source URL: <https://m.explorable.com/e/abc-model?gid=21950>