

**Coping**

Exercise



10-20 min



Client



No



The Spheres of Personal Control

Clients often spend a great deal of time trying to control factors that are, in fact, beyond their control. For instance, they believe that they can control their spouse, child, friends, co-workers, etc. They believe that they can control their thoughts, their sleep, and even their health. Although a certain level of influence and control may apply, in most cases, clients have little control over how other people think, how they react, what they do, and how they behave. Although one may choose to eat healthy food, exercise frequently, and do everything else in one's power to maintain physical health, there are factors outside of our control that affect our health (i.e., genetic makeup, involvement in accidents, etc.)

Many studies have demonstrated the paradoxical process underlying perceived control. For example, a study by Harvey (2003) showed that participants who suppressed their pre-sleep thoughts took longer to fall asleep and rated their sleep as more restless compared to participants who merely relaxed without trying to control their thoughts. In a similar vein, research on thought control has revealed that trying to control thoughts leads to an increase in the frequency of these thoughts (Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Becoming aware of the limits of personal control can be considered an important ingredient for effective self-regulation and goal achievement.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is for the client to become aware of factors that are within and beyond personal control. This awareness can prevent the client from wasting precious energy by attempting to control the uncontrollable and promote the investment of energy into controllable things.



Advice

- Becoming aware of our limited ability to control the world outside ourselves can be a confronting experience for clients, especially those who have spent a great deal of time trying to control things that are beyond their control. The practitioner needs to inform clients that the goal of this exercise is not to scare them or to induce helplessness by showing how little they can influence their lives but to help them invest their energy differently to improve overall well-being. Therefore, the practitioner should also focus on identifying and promoting behavioral actions that are within the client's sphere of control.

- It is important to inform clients that there is a difference between influence and control. For example, by going to bed early, one may –potentially– influence the quality of sleep, but ultimately, one cannot control the quality of sleep. In other words, one can control the time of going to bed, which may affect sleep quality, but not necessarily. There is no guaranteed action that one can take that will cause better sleep (even taking sleeping pills has been found to affect sleep quality negatively). The goal of this exercise is to help the client distinguish between the actions that are within his/her control and those that are outside of his/her control.
- This exercise can be valuable for clients dealing with difficult life situations that trigger feelings of fear and that induce an urge to exert control (i.e., disease, the end of a relationship, etc.).
- This exercise may also be valuable for clients who believe that they have less control than they do (external locus of control). Research has shown that although it is important to be aware of the limits of personal control, it is equally important to be aware of the ability to influence situations through one's actions (see, for instance, Zimmerman, 2000). Because this exercise includes the identification of factors over which one can exert control, it can help increase clients' beliefs about personal control.
- This exercise may be used in conjunction with acceptance-based practice. Doing this exercise can help clients understand the importance and necessity of applying acceptance-based coping.
- As an alternative, a more graphical approach of this exercise involves drawing two separate circles and then asking the client to list the things that can be controlled in the left circle and then list the things that cannot be controlled in the right circle. Note, however, that this approach is less structured compared to the current approach because it is more difficult to graphically link separate goals to specific aspects of control or no control.



References

- Caruso, J. (2003). *The power of losing control: Finding strength, meaning, and happiness in an out of control world*. Penguin-Putnam.
- Harvey, A. G. (2003). The attempted suppression of presleep cognitive activity in insomnia. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 27, 593-602.
- Leary, M. R., Adams, C. E., & Tate, E. B. (2006). Hypo-egoic self-regulation: Exercising self-control by diminishing the influence of the self. *Journal of Personality*, 74, 1803-1832.
- Wenzlaff, R. M., & Wegner, D. M. (2000). Thought suppression. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 51, 59-91.
- Zimmerman, B.J. (2000). Self-efficacy: An essential motive to learn. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 82-91.



The Spheres of Personal Control

Instructions

Step 1: Identifying desired outcomes

Take a moment to consider an important goal that you would like to achieve. Write this goal in the first column of Table 1 on page 5. Make sure to formulate the goal in a way that specifies a direction towards an outcome (e.g., I want to feel more relaxed) rather than a direction away from an undesired outcome (e.g., I want to experience less stress).

Step 2: Identifying actions

Consider the goal you mentioned in Step 1. Think of actions that will help you get closer to your goal and write them in the second column of Table 1 on page 5.

Step 3: Identifying actions that are within personal control

Now, look at the actions you listed in Step 2 and determine which aspects of the action you can fully control. In other words, which aspects of the action do not rely on other people or on uncontrollable circumstances to follow through with them? List these aspects in the third column of Table 1 on page 5.

Step 4: Identifying factors that are outside personal control

Consider each of the actions you can fully control, as listed in Step 3. For each action, think of all of the things associated with that action over which you do not have full control. In other words, think of the aspects of the action (often the consequences of the actions) that lie beyond your power. List them in the fourth column of Table 1 on page 5.

Step 5: Repeat when necessary

In case there are multiple goals, you may repeat steps 1-4 for each goal you aim to achieve. An example of a completed table is shown on page 6.



Reflection

After completing the exercise, reflect by answering the following questions:

How was it to do this exercise?

What did you learn from this exercise?

Are there any current actions that you believe would benefit from spending less energy on?
(uncontrollable factors)

Are there any current actions that you believe would benefit from spending more energy on?
(controllable factors)



Table 1. Overview of factors/actions within versus beyond personal control

Desired outcome	Factors/Actions to achieve the desired outcome	Factors/Actions I can control	Factors/Actions beyond my control

**Table 2. Example of the completed form**

Desired outcome	Factors/Actions to achieve the desired outcome	Factors/Actions I can control	Factors/Actions beyond my control
Create more balance between working life and private life	ask my boss to work less	how and when I will ask for it	how my boss reacts
		start working earlier	how my colleagues respond when seeing me leave early
	Stop working after 6 pm	disable work email account on my mobile devices after 18:00	my thoughts about not being able to check my email after 18:00
More effective dealing with my emotions	allow myself to experience my emotions more fully	reserve time to spend more time alone	whether my emotions become more intense or less intense
Feel well-rested	reserve more time for sleeping	the time I will go to bed	the quality of my sleep