Motivating Change when Working with Criminal Thinking

Objectives
- Identify the 8 criminal thinking errors
- Specify which of the criminal thinking errors most apply to sex offenders
- Give examples of criminal thinking error statements
- Describe techniques for working with clients exhibiting criminal thinking errors

Objectives of Sex Offender Treatment
- Take responsibility
- Develop prevention skills and techniques
- Lead productive and prosocial lives
- CBT approach to
  - Understand inter-relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviors
  - How these affect conduct
  - Develop more healthy thinking patterns and appropriate emotional management
  - Recovery approach to identifying risk factors and triggers

Differences from Traditional Therapy
- Not client centered
- Not non-judgmental
- Behavioral limits are set
- Unconditional neutral regard rather than positive regard – “acceptance of equanimity”
- Trust is not assumed or given
- “How do I not re-offend” as opposed to “Why did I offend” – recovery model
- Statements rather than questions
- High level of structure and activity

Criminal Thinking Errors
- Cognitive distortions – Attitudes and beliefs supporting sexually abusive or antisocial behaviors
- May prevent offender’s recognition of seriousness of problem
- May shield from guilt and distress
- Cognitive restructuring – designed to address criminal thinking errors

The Three Cs of Criminal Thinking

Conditions
Cognitions
Choices
Criminal Thinking is at the root of criminal behavior…

Mollification – “I am the victim”
- Attempt to place blame on external sources for irresponsible, deviant or intrusive behaviors
- Rooted in adolescent self-justifications and rationalizations
- May point to the unfairness or inequities in life

Examples of Mollification Statements
- “They put all that porn on the internet and it’s everywhere. What am I supposed to do with that?”
- “When I got out, all the girls were wearing clothes that are an invitation.”
- “It was her fault. She wanted me and then got mad and cried rape!”

Techniques
- Acknowledge how difficult it is to admit to problem behavior
- Don’t be too quick to “write them off” as being in denial or unamenable to treatment
- Use empathy and individual acceptance while avoiding appearance of acceptance of criminal, deviant and intrusive behaviors
- Use contingency management to supplement treatment motivation

Cutoff – “Everyone is out to get me”
- Used to eliminate deterrents to criminal behaviors from the decision making process
- May use simple phrase, musical theme, visual image – usually one or two preferred
- Under the voluntary control of the offender
- Eliminates fear and anxiety that prevents most people from engaging in serious crimes
- Alcohol and drugs or pornography may be external cutoffs

Examples of Cutoff Statements
- “F--- it!!”
- “They are draining me of my ability to love… I’ll show them!”
- “What difference does it make? No body believes me anyway.”
Techniques

- Develop discrepancy between goals and thoughts/behaviors
- Be straightforward about treatment, expectations and informed consent
- Provide information
- Delay impulsive decision to drop out of treatment while emphasizing that it is still a choice

Entitlement – “The world owes me”

- A belief that the world exists for one’s personal benefit and pleasure therefore one is exempt from societal rules, laws, or personal rights of others
- Believes he has a right to take whatever he wants from whomever or whatever he wants
- Wants are mislabeled as needs and one only takes what is needed

Three Basic Elements of Entitlement

- Ownership
  - Rights to due what is “mine”
- Uniqueness
  - Special person so rules do not apply
- Misidentification
  - Seeing wants as needs

Examples of Entitlement Statements

- “She’s my daughter and I’ll f--- her if I want to!”
- “I have basic needs and I have a right to get my needs met.”
- “Most people have to follow the rules because they are simple and don’t understand how things work. That doesn’t apply to me.”

Techniques

- Avoid losing objectivity
- Set firm boundaries
- Avoid argumentation
- Use victim impact panels or role plays to increase offender empathy

Power Orientation – “I will control others.”

- An obsession with gaining control over environment/others
- The “weak” can be manipulated, coerced, intimidated or used for one’s own benefit
- May use irritation or anger to control
- An attempt to control one’s surroundings
Two Primary Elements of Power Orientation

- Zero state
  - Feelings of impotence or powerlessness
- Power thrust
  - An attempt to remedy zero state thoughts and feelings
  - May exist without zero state

Examples of Power Orientation Statements

- “If you tell, everybody will know it was your fault because you are a slut”
- “You forced me to do it because you didn’t do what I told you.”

Techniques

- Situation of Probation, Parole, or prison reminds one of apparent lack of control
- Avoid power struggles
- Use the power/control wheel

Sentimentality – “Mr. Good Guy”

- Tendency to show tender feelings and acceptable interests for self-serving purposes
  - to feel good about self
- Attempt to present self in a favorable light despite criminal and intrusive actions
  - provide a positive view of self
  - Irrational statements to point to “good” accomplishments

Examples of Sentimentality Statements

- “I’m a deacon at the church and even coach the youth baseball team.”
- “I love my wife and am a good father to my kids.”
- “I provide for my family and am respected as a businessman in the community.”

Without Sentimentality

- Three options
  - Continued violation
  - Suicide
  - Change
**Techniques**

- Avoid being “seduced” by the offender
- Be aware of countertransference issues
- Go slow as this is a defense mechanism
- Challenge gently
- Present reality – “Some important community leaders have been convicted of sex offenses.”
- Note inconsistencies in presentation and official legal documentation

**Superoptimism**

- Extreme optimism and self-confidence in self-appraisal of attributes or chances of suffering negative consequences of unacceptable actions
- Necessary to continue in criminal behavior
- Based in desires rather than reality
- Avoidance of establishing realistic goals

**Examples of Superoptimism Statements**

- “She’s not going to say anything against me.”
- “I’m going to beat this because people will see what an upstanding person I am.”
- “I am going to start my own business when I get out of here and make big bucks.”

**Techniques**

- Work through ambivalence
- Don’t push or rush the offender through
- Listen for change talk
- Remind them of reality by presenting facts

**Cognitive Indolence**

- Lazy – takes the path of least resistance
- Exceedingly lazy, easily bored, overly accepting of one’s own ideas
- Searches for shortcuts to achieve unrealistic goals – “get rich quick”
- Uses broad, global term without specifics to avoid being accountable
- Very frustrating for others
- Major roadblock to long-term change

**Examples of Cognitive Indolence Statements**

- “It’s easier for me to stay away from my family. Then I don’t have to answer questions about what I am doing.”
- “I won’t answer questions when it is difficult or unpleasant.”
Techniques

• Communicate with team to avoid triangulation by offender
• Use structured activities to minimize resistance
• Premature and/or forceful confrontation may be counterproductive to the change process and lead to:
  • Energetic disagreement by offender
  • Minimizing problem
  • Insincere acceptance of treatment
  • Non-compliance with treatment

Discontinuity

• Failure to follow through on commitments, intentions, or difficulty remaining focused on goals over time
• Externally oriented therefore easily distracted by environmental events
• Commitment to change difficult to maintain from one situation to the next or from one context to another
• Compartmentalize thoughts, feelings and actions

Examples of Discontinuity Statements

• “I was doing great in working my recovery plan but just down the street from the meeting house was a porn shop.”
• My parole officer is too hard on me. He expects me to pay my fees when I don’t have money. Work is not going well because my supervisor is a woman who has major control issues.

Case Studies

• The chair: Present, Past, Future
• Practice skills
  • Assessment/engagement
  • Developing discrepancy
  • Dealing with resistance
  • Developing a plan
  • Setting goals

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