

HANDOUT 6-D

A CASE STUDY ILLUSTRATING CBT

Daniel was a 32-year-old office worker who struggled with anxiety and low self-esteem. During one session, he described some problems he had with his mother-in-law. Their relationship had always been somewhat distant and awkward and he never felt quite accepted by her. I asked him to write down some of his thoughts about his mother-in-law. He had several but the first two were: "She hates me." "She wants me to know that she hates me."

He gave me permission to ask questions about his thoughts. First, I asked him if he noticed any varieties of ANTS. He was able to identify "mind reading" because he was assuming that he knew his mother-in-law's thoughts. It was also an example of "all-or-none thinking" because he was assuming that she completely hated him and had no positive thoughts about him at all.

I then asked, "Except for how you feel, what is the evidence that she hates you?" He described a couple incidents that might have been interpreted as slights, but it wasn't at all clear if that is what she intended. I then asked, "What is the evidence that she doesn't hate you?" He described several pleasant conversations that they had had, and how he had helped her with a problem she was having.

I then asked, "Do you think she completely hates you, that you have no worth at all?" He had to admit that he really didn't know for sure how she felt about him, but he doubted that she hated him completely. She probably had mixed feelings about him.

As we discussed this further, he decided that it was OK if she had mixed feelings about him. After all, he had mixed feelings about her, so how could he expect her to feel otherwise?

I went on to ask, "So, if it is your best guess that she had mixed feelings about you, what choices do you have about how you respond to that?" We decided that he had two choices: (1) He could sulk, feel sorry for himself, and nurse a grudge against her. (2) He could accept it and work to build the best relationship with her that he could. He chose the second option.

You will notice that I didn't argue with him because I didn't know how she felt about him. My goal was to help him see that he had a choice about how to navigate this relationship.