Learning from Behavioural Experiments

Behavioural experiments (Bennett-Levy et al 2004: 8) are '…planned experiential activities, based on experimentation or observation, which are undertaken by patients in or between cognitive therapy sessions…. . Their design is derived directly from a cognitive formulation of the problem….. to
- test the validity of the patients' existing beliefs about themselves, others, and the world
- construct and/or test new, more adaptive beliefs
- contribute to the development and verification of the cognitive formulation'

There are a number of key steps in designing effective behavioural experiments (Fennell 1989, Wells 1997):

1. *PREPARING* – clearly focusing on the unhelpful thought to be tested
    this will involve discussing the nature of the unhelpful thought – exploring the evidence for the thought, and the positive and negative consequences (e.g. feelings and actions) of continuing to believe the thought
    it will also involve identifying a more helpful alternative thought(s)

2. *PLANNING* the experiment
    this will involve planning a meaningful test to explore which thought is most accurate – consider the following:
    o   fostering a sense of curiosity,
    o   encouraging a 'no lose' attitude (keeping an open mind to either discovering that a more helpful alternative thought is more accurate or, if the original thought proved to be accurate, clarifying the need to use practical problem solving),
    o   considering possible outcomes and making predictions about what may happen,
    o   encouraging clear, specific and detailed planning

3. *EXPERIENCING* the experiment (doing it)

4. *OBSERVING / EXAMINING* what happened
    this will involve making observations throughout the test – recording and rating thoughts and feelings before, during and after the test, what was noticed about the situation, and the outcome of the experiment

5. *REFLECTING* – making sense of the experiment
    this will involve discussing the results of the test and ways of putting any new learning into practice
    o   problem-solving and action planning any practical difficulties
    o   helping the person to understand the basic cognitive-behavioural model more fully
    o   maximising the benefits of any new discoveries

A sample record for monitoring behavioural experiments is shown on the following page.

John Butler – Consultant Nurse
PSI Resources: brief description of key interventions (2007)

Behavioural Experiment *(adapted from: Bennett-Levy et al 2004: 43)*

Date:

Identify the thought(s) to be tested. Rate how much you believe the thought (0-100)

Have you identified an alternative thought? If so, write it down and rate how much you believe this thought (0-100)

Devise an experiment to test the thought(s). What exactly will you do? Where and when? What will you watch out for?

Identify likely problems. How will you deal with them?

Outcome: What happened? What did you observe?

What have you learned? How does what happened relate to the target thought (s) and the alternative(s)? How far do you now believe them (0-100)?

What next? What further experiments can you do?