

Review of Two Day Workshop presented by Dr Melanie Fennell Brisbane, 17-18 August 2006

As a first time attendee of an AACBT workshop I had been looking forward to the two day workshop on overcoming low self-esteem with cognitive therapy presented by Dr. Melanie Fennell. Melanie is based at the Oxford University Dept. of Psychiatry and is the Director of Cognitive Therapy Studies and a founder of the Oxford Cognitive Therapy Centre. There were about 20 participants who attended the two-day workshop. These numbers brought a nice dynamic to the group and allowed for regular input from participants. The longer two day format was especially good as it gave participants an opportunity to really develop an understanding of the subject matter and to apply this to their own therapeutic setting.

A measure of the interactive nature of the workshop was demonstrated by one of the opening activities. Melanie encouraged participants to consider a few key questions we would like answered through the workshop. These were recorded on a sticky note and placed on a whiteboard. Over the two days Melanie referred to these questions and at the conclusion were asked to revisit our questions and remove those questions which had been answered. From a personal perspective I was looking at practical strategies to use to assess and work with those with low self-esteem (LSE). What initially attracted me to this workshop was that LSE seems to be a common experience of many of the clients I work with.

One aspect of the training that was emphasised was that of the behavioural experiment. These are those challenging tasks that typically therapists ask clients to complete between sessions and are designed to test the validity of long-held thoughts and beliefs. In keeping with the notion of developing empathy with clients participants were asked to design a behavioural experiment to trial overnight. We worked in pairs alternating the role of client and therapist. This was a considerably more challenging task than it first appeared. The initial task was to develop an experiment that would be challenging and could be carried out overnight.

I chose a cleanliness task which necessitated me not washing my hands for an entire evening whilst preparing and eating a meal. I had hoped this would simulate the situation for a client with an obsessive compulsive disorder. Carrying out the activity proved to be considerably more difficult than I first envisioned. I did however manage to complete the task despite feeling uncomfortable at times. The following day participants were given the opportunity to reflect on the experience both with the group and with our 'therapists'. Many found the experience challenging and some found it difficult to complete the task. However in true therapist fashion there were no failures and we were encouraged to process and learn from the experience whether or not the task was completed.

For me it really highlighted the courage many of our clients demonstrate when they regularly undertake these challenges.

I found the two day workshop to be extremely rewarding both professionally and personally. The presenter Dr. Melanie Fennell not only displayed an in-depth understanding of the conceptual framework of LSE she also communicated her considerable experience in application of these principles. The combination of didactic presentation, individual exercises, discussion and videos of treatment sessions made this a rich learning experience. Suffice to say by the end of the two days there were very few sticky notes remaining on the whiteboard.

Nathan Seefeld