

What is “Guided Discovery” in CBT

Dr James Manning
Self-Growth, March 2009

Commonly asked questions by people learning about Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) are -

“What is guided discovery?”

“Is it about the therapist directing the client?”

“Is ‘Socratic dialogue’ the same thing as guided discovery?”

“How do I offer guided discovery?”

One thing for sure, is that the concept often feels overwhelming when we first try this type of approach.

My view point is that, guided discovery, can be one of the most beneficial interventions used within CBT. In a nut-shell, guided discovery is a process that a therapist uses to help his or her client reflect on the way that they process information. Through the processes of answering questions or reflecting on thinking processes, a range of alternative thinking is opened up for each client. This alternative thinking forms the blueprint for changing perceptions and behaviours.

Essentially, it could be suggested that a client approaching a CBT therapist is initially functioning at a mindless level. This is not to say that a client is ignorant or not able to think. Rather, that the client has a range of automatic cognitive processes that are being allowed to run without intervention. Some of these thinking processes may have been developed in childhood, while others may directly result from an immediate mood state.

A useful analogy for guided discovery is to think about going to an optician’s for an eye test. The optician may initially put a contraption on their clients head with a range of lenses on it. Initially, their clients cannot see through this contraption very well (i.e., what they perceive is a blur). The optician then sets about gradually removing or replacing lenses, and after a while, through a process of trial and error (and feedback from the client) each individual begins to see more clearly.

Guided discovery works in exactly the same way. Except, instead of using optical lenses, the CBT therapist helps the client use lenses of perception. Perceiving information in a different way allows each client to access a range of choices in their life, ostensibly, to see their life through different lenses. When we view life in a different way our emotional reaction to events also shifts. These types of continued conscious re-evaluations in CBT are very important because they lay the foundations of future ‘automatic thinking’ and make relapse less likely.