



COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES
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DECISIONAL BALANCE

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Definition: A decisional-balance exercise is an elaborated form of “pros-and-cons” review that is often used in deciding whether to change behaviour. It provides an opportunity to examine both the negative and positive aspects of a behaviour, acknowledge ambivalence, and allow clients to feel understood rather than judged.

Elements: Decisional balance can be done in written form or in conversation at any point in therapy which seems appropriate. The clinician shapes the process through questions, summaries and selective emphasis. Like a pros-and-cons discussion, the therapist usually starts by exploring “good things” and then “not-so-good things” about the status quo, and finally asks clients to consider what might be “good and also not-so-good” if they ever decided to change their behaviour. The client and the therapist can thus weigh both the positive aspects and the potential difficulties of behaviour change, and how drawbacks could be addressed.

Related Procedures: Motivational interviewing, motivational enhancement therapy, pros-and-cons review

Application: When indicated during any session of motivational interviewing or motivational enhancement therapy or when addressing potential behaviour change, e.g. when discussing reducing addiction or other harmful behaviours, leaving an abusive relationship, starting an exercise program, returning to school.

1st Use? Janis & Mann (1977), elaborated by Miller & Rollnick (1991)

References:

1. Janis IL, Mann L (1977) *Decision-making: A psychological analysis of conflict, choice, and commitment*. New York: Free Press.
2. Miller WR, Rollnick S (1991, 1st ed. & 2002, 2nd ed.) *Motivational interviewing: Preparing people to change addictive behaviour*. New York: Guilford.
<http://motivationalinterview.org/clinical/decisionalbalance.pdf>

Case Illustration (Diskin unpublished)

During therapy session 3 Gina and her therapist agreed that exercise could probably help her low mood yet Gina hadn't managed to start. The therapist then shaped a decisional-balance discussion which lasted 11 minutes:

(1. Staying unchanged - not exercising: A. Good things)

T. So tell me what's good about not exercising?

G. I just don't have the energy; it's hard to get started.... I don't have the time either - I drag myself around on weekends to do my chores

T. You sound pretty tired and overwhelmed already. What else?

G. Well, I'm out of shape, fat, a mess...I hate having to start

(B. Not-so-good things)

T. I see it's really hard to get going ...on the other hand, ...tell me what you dislike about not exercising?

G. It's funny, but when I was working out I had more energy, and felt stronger, less tired

T. Anything else?

G. I'm gaining tons of weight, hate looking like this. I used to be really fit when I was running.

(2. Changing - starting to exercise: A. Not-so-good things)

T. Imagine you did decide to start. What would be hard, get in the way?

G. I'm in terrible shape. I'd hate feeling so weak. ...but already feel that way –

T. What else would be hard?

G. I don't like to run on my own. I'd have to phone someone and feel such a slob.

T. So it would be hard to call old running friends because they'd look down on you?

G. Yeah, ...except Jen called a few times to ask if I want to run. She was injured and wants to start.

T. You mentioned time as a problem

G. Yeah, but I used to run before work, it wasn't that bad once I started...

(B. Good things)

T. So if you did start and kept it up, what would that be like?

G. Well, I'd stop feeling a slob. ...could lose weight, wear some of the clothes I had to put away.

T. Anything else?

G. I'd have more energy – I used to be able to run in the morning, work all day and go out at night. Now I'm barely making it to work... I like feeling strong...

T. It felt good physically. Do you remember what your mood was like when you were exercising?

G. Yeah, I felt a lot better and spent less time alone watching TV. I did more non-running things, volunteer work

After completing this exercise the therapist and Gina reviewed it, Gina gradually began exercising, and her mood improved during her remaining 7 sessions over 2 months.