

Therapeutic Applications for Communication Center Student Efficacy: Motivational Interviewing and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

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What is Motivational Interviewing & Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?

Research consistently proves that communication centers serve a vital role in aiding student success. This article explores the possibilities of further augmenting centers' effectiveness on student motivation and success through the application of two therapeutic concepts: Motivational Interviewing and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Motivational Interviewing (or MI) "is a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion" (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 29). Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (or CBT) is an intervention that focuses on challenging and changing cognitive distortions that an individual has. Developed by Dr. Aaron Beck, CBT aims to help the individual understand that thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes can often be distorted especially when an individual is distressed (Beck Institute, 2022).

Relevance to Student Success

Initially, most students see no purpose or benefit in going to their university communication center but will do so anyway to meet the requirement of one of their courses. Our job as communication consultants or other center staff is to show them how we have the ability to assist them in multiple areas of their college journeys. Motivational Interviewing and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy are two modalities that can be utilized in our sessions to achieve this outcome.

The COVID-19 Pandemic caused major changes in everyone's life and mental health status, especially students. One major concern of this shift was to consider how this would have an impact on student motivation. A study focusing on students' motivation and learning response found that student's motivation and self-regulation decreased post-pandemic while their stress level increased (Usher et al., 2021). Even pre-pandemic, students with appropriately managed mental health had higher rates of motivation compared to those with untreated depression and anxiety (Mahdavi et. al, 2017). Thus, it is important to consider and be mindful of student mental health if we are to increase student motivation.

Motivational Interviewing and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy are both evidence-based practices that assist people in managing negative mental health symptoms, and the practices behind them are readily transferable to the mission of communication centers. Motivational

Interviewing focuses on the individual speaker's personal reasons for motivation, while Cognitive Behavioral Therapy reframes negative thoughts students may have about communication centers and their own speaking abilities.

Utilization Case Study: How One University Communication Center Applies MI-CBT

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) communication center already utilizes Motivational Interviewing and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (MI-CBT) to an extent. The training that our staff attends, as well as the services and support we offer, assist speakers in increasing motivation. The following is a description of the specific MI-CBT strategies that our consultants offer speakers at the center, and an analysis of the positive impact thereof.

As previously mentioned, students usually do not readily see the connection between communication centers and student motivation/success. At UNCG, students are required to attend the communication center by their professors, usually in their Communication Studies (CST 105) class often taken during the first year at university. This first visit can be instrumental in connecting with the student and demonstrating how communication centers can support them in their college journey.

UNCG Communication Center Director Kim Cuny recognized the need for staff to be prepared. Since communicating to students why something is helpful directly influences their motivation around the topic (Shin et. al, 2017), Cuny asked all staff to reflect on how the speaking center has assisted us in our motivation and how it has improved our college experience holistically. Our staff then uses these personal stories to identify with speakers and help them navigate personal motivation while reflecting on the common ways negative mental health can impact it.

By utilizing storytelling, we are actively using a piece of CBT called cognitive reframing. Cognitive reframing is a component of CBT that seeks to change one's negative/irrational beliefs and behaviors. In this case, communication consultants are working to reframe the speaker's negative thoughts that the center visit will not be beneficial to them. Our stories can help speakers in seeing how speaking centers can be a great support for them throughout their college experience, ultimately motivating them to attend the center again and have success in the classroom.

Consultants utilize concepts of MI as well. While conducting a consultation, the consultant asks questions that prompt the speaker to reflect on the process of work of the speech, from invention to delivery. For example, consultants will ask, "how do you feel about your speech?" and, "what about this topic interests you?" or even, "what is something you feel as though you did well, and an area that you would like to improve on?" This line of questioning shifts focus and allows the speaker to feel more in control of their speech, and thus more motivated to successfully complete the assignment.

Looking Ahead

When reviewing how MI and CBT have been utilized at the UNCG communication

center, I see the benefits that both modalities offer to meet the goal of motivating students. Therefore, I suggest that we extend the use of these modalities in a few different ways.

Motivational Interviewing

The goal of MI is to empower the individual to identify goals and implement the needed change to meet those goals. It is structured in a way so that the individual responds to purposefully open-ended questions designed to help them feel more in control of assignments or tasks they must complete. MI can be used to empower first-year students who are struggling to see the benefits that communication centers offer by showing them how the center can assist them in finding the motivation to make changes that will benefit them in their college journey and even their future professions. Communication consultants can utilize this technique to ask clients questions like: “when do you see yourself having to give an oral presentation outside of class?” and “what benefits can you identify from attending your session at the communication center?” These questions can get student clients to reflect on how communication centers can in fact be beneficial to them in their college journey and in their future professions.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

The goal of utilizing CBT is to reframe the individual’s negative thoughts about themselves or a situation. Whether students have negative thoughts about their own speaking abilities or doubts about how the communication center can support them throughout their college journey, CBT can help. Communication consultants can utilize this technique by reframing negative thoughts that the student has about public speaking. For example, if the student client expresses that they do not see the purpose in utilizing the communication center, consultants can guide the individual in identifying why they have those beliefs and then looking at evidence as to how the speaking center can help. Consultants can reframe the clients’ negative thoughts by giving them information and additional resources outside of the center. Additionally, while it is true that CBT can be an immediately helpful tool for reducing speaking anxiety and increasing students’ relationship with the center, it also demonstrates the power of challenging negative thoughts about their abilities in other classes throughout their college career.

Getting Started with Implementation

In moving forward with implementing CBT and MI in communication centers, directors could begin by creating training sessions wherein both they and their consultants reflect on their own college journey and the impact the center has had on them. Reflecting on these stories and sharing them with fellow consultants in the communication center space can strengthen individual consultants' perceptions of their own success in relation to communication centers as well as help consultants and directors can form a united front in supporting one another as they take these CBT-MI strategies with them into student speaker sessions.

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