

Surfing the Three Waves of CBT in Community Supervision

Raymond Chip Tafrate¹ and Damon Mitchell

Central Connecticut State University

Benjamin J. Mackey and CJ Appleton

George Mason University

Scott T. Walters

University of North Texas Health Science Center

JoAnn S. Lee and Faye S. Taxman

George Mason University

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY and techniques (CBT) are considered evidence-based in the field of criminal justice (and psychology, social work, and most helping professions). In 1990, Andrews and colleagues found that correctional programs that used CBT had superior reductions in recidivism compared to those that used other therapeutic approaches. This finding has been replicated in numerous meta-analyses that summarize the “what works” literature (see Cullen & Jonston, 2012; Landenberger & Lipsey, 2005; Sherman et al., 1997). The recognition of the effectiveness of CBT in correctional settings led to the integration of CBT-based approaches in community supervision. The adaptation of CBT to the work of community corrections officers contributed to a number of special initiatives that underscore the importance of core correctional practices (see EPICS, Smith et al., 2012; PCS, Taxman, 2008; STARR, Lowenkamp et al., 2014; STICS,

Bonta et al., 2021; SUSTAIN, Toronjo, 2020). Currently, CBT is recognized by the National Institute of Corrections as part of their eight principles of recidivism reduction (<https://nicic.gov/implementing-evidence-based-practice-community-corrections-principles-effective-intervention>).

Despite its effectiveness with forensic (i.e., justice-involved) populations, implementing CBT in community corrections settings is complex. Probation officers (POs) using these techniques must be familiar with (1) criminogenic thinking and other leading factors for future criminality; (2) behavioral, cognitive, and social learning theories; and (3) effective communication skills. Implementing CBT techniques requires POs to take on the role of a behavioral manager and/or change agent, office visits require role-playing and practicing skills, and case planning involves a recidivism reduction strategy centered around changes in client thinking and behavior. This can be very different from traditional approaches that are concentrated on “checking in” and surveillance around court-mandated requirements. Once officers are trained, agencies wrestle with strategies to ensure that the newly learned CBT skills are integrated into routine practice and become the new norm for case planning and office visits.

Another challenge is that defining the nebulous concept of CBT can be difficult, especially regarding the assortment of activities POs might incorporate into their office visits. In this paper, we review the three distinct historical waves of CBT, describe activities in each wave that POs can use to help clients change thinking and behavior patterns likely to drive offending, and provide some tips for integrating CBT activities into office visits in community corrections settings.

Making Sense of the CBT Landscape

CBT has undergone considerable evolution and expansion as a form of treatment. Since the 1960s, the term CBT has come to encompass a plethora of models, interventions, and techniques for altering thinking and behavior, making this treatment approach appear amorphous and indistinct. A review of popular CBT books and websites, for instance, suggests that a consensus definition of CBT does not currently exist. In the forensic area, in particular, scholars have noted conceptual confusion about what exactly constitutes CBT (Mitchell et al., 2018; Seeler et al., 2014), a lack of clarity on what type of activities should be included under the CBT umbrella (Eckhardt & Schram, 2009), and little consistency in

¹ This work was funded by Arnold Ventures and the opinions here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the funding agency. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Raymond Chip Tafrate, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Central Connecticut State University, 1615 Stanley Street, New Britain, CT 06050. E-mail: Tafrater@ccsu.edu.

operationalizing CBT principles in real-world forensic programs (Wong & Bouchard, 2021).

In an attempt to organize this confusing landscape, some have characterized the CBT “package” as evolving from three distinct intellectual waves (DiGiuseppe, 2008; Leahy, 2008): *Behaviorism*, *Cognitive*, and *Mindfulness/Values*. We will look at applications of CBT to community corrections from the perspective of these three waves. Each wave has a different emphasis, and different set of steps (and common missteps) when it comes to implementation. We also provide small portions of PO-client dialogue to distinguish between these three waves of CBT in their real-world application. These sample conversations are directed at the criminogenic need area of *criminal companions*—managing the client’s relationship with a friend who engages in substance use, drug selling, and breaking into houses.²

The CBT dialogue presented would normally occur after the client recognizes the friendship as problematic and shows some willingness to take steps to reduce the friend’s negative influence. In terms of strategy, CBT-oriented conversations are best placed after the officer-client relationship has been established and clients have acknowledged the factors that put them most at risk for future justice involvement. Since POs are not psychotherapists, the CBT conversations presented below are brief and can typically be conducted in less than 30 minutes.

The first dialog provides some context and sets the stage for conversations related to the three waves of CBT that follow.

PO: Last time we met, you talked about your friend Tavis and how you sometimes feel pressured to do things that might get you jammed up with the police and probation.

Client: Yeah. I sometimes feel pressure to do stuff with him. I know he can be a bad

influence on me, but I don’t want to end the friendship. I’ve known him for as long as I can remember; he’s like family. Even if I did try to end things, we live in the same neighborhood. I just don’t want him to cause trouble for me.

PO: It sounds like we should talk about managing your friendship with Tavis and the pressure you sometimes feel to do things with him that can get you in trouble again. Can you tell me where you’re most likely to see Tavis and when things are most likely to get out of control?

Client: Well, I normally see him when I go over to this house up the street. He gets in trouble a lot, but mostly at night on the weekends. Sometimes he asks me to join him in doing things that are probably a bad idea.

First Wave: An Emphasis on Behaviorism

From a *first wave* perspective, criminal behavior is largely viewed as a function of environmental influences such as reinforcement history (i.e., which behaviors have been rewarded?), associative learning (i.e., connections between stimuli resulting in automatic-like reactions), and modeling (i.e., copying the actions of others). Interventions that developed from this wave were based on operant and classical conditioning models originally derived from animal learning experiments of the early twentieth century (e.g., Thorndike, Watson, Pavlov, Watson, & Skinner). Traditional behavioral principles include positive and negative reinforcement, punishment, and exposure and response prevention.

From a behaviorism perspective, correctional case planning is centered around understanding the relationship between risky stimuli in a client’s life (e.g., a friend who steals cars) and the client’s dysfunctional seemingly automatic reactions to those stimuli (e.g., spending time with that friend when he is likely to steal a car). Interventions are designed to alter a client’s observable behavior (as opposed to internal processes such as thoughts) and typically emphasize the teaching, rehearsal, and adoption of new behaviors that will decrease criminal risk and subsequently become reinforced in the client’s natural environment. Well-known interventions based on behaviorism include

contingency management (progressive rewards for program attendance, adherence, and completion); skills training (vocational, social, and emotional); behavioral activation (supporting first steps in a prosocial direction); and relaxation techniques (to slow down impulsive automatic reactions and improve emotion regulation). A mantra that captures the spirit of the behavioral approach is to “get clients off their autopilot reactions.”

Applying a Behavioral Approach to the Case Example

This brief dialogue is focused on developing skills for distancing oneself from a companion who might lead to trouble, as well as behavioral activation (first steps) in that process. Notice how the office visit ends with coaching and rehearsal of a concrete skill. Subsequent appointments might incorporate additional skills-building components related to avoiding that person and/or changing the larger social network.

PO: How do you usually end up at Tavis’s house? What starts it off?

Client: He texts me to come over. And if I have nothing to do, I say yes. Also, I don’t want him thinking I’m lame or that I’m not up for hanging out.

PO: You mentioned weekend nights are the riskiest times to hang out with him? Does he want to get together at other times?

Client: Sometimes. We might hang out and watch a movie on a weekday afternoon after work. Problems occur when I go over there on Friday or Saturday nights and he has other friends over. Then things can get messed up.

PO: It sounds like there are certain times and situations when you get more pressure to do things that might get you in trouble.

Client: Yeah. There’s definitely a pattern.

PO: How can you minimize your exposure to those situations that put you at risk for getting in trouble again while still staying in touch with your friend?

Client: Well, I could stop going over there on Friday and Saturday nights. I could just hang out with him after work on the weekdays.

² In addressing criminal companions, it is often preferable to have clients identify relationships likely to increase the likelihood of future criminal justice interactions and take steps towards distancing from such individuals, while strengthening existing healthy relationships that are more prosocial. However, in some cases, it may be unrealistic or counterproductive to push a client to cease all contact with such a companion. The strategy of assisting clients to develop skills to manage specific features of a friendship that are likely to lead to future arrest, while maintaining the relationship, may be more acceptable. This is the approach taken with the case example.

PO: That sounds like a good step. Sort of staying away from situations where you feel pressure to do things that could get you in trouble. Let's talk about steps you can take when you get a text from Tavis to hang out on a Friday or Saturday evening. Next time he texts you at one of the risky times, how could you respond?

Client: I could tell him I'm hanging out with my girlfriend. Then I could mention that I'll catch up with him during the week.

PO: That sounds good. Let's practice some ways you can respond to his texts. What exactly would you type as a response?

[PO and client practice different scenarios for responding to texts from Tavis. Future office visits would also focus on developing skills for "leaving the situation" when things seem to be headed towards committing a crime, as well as ways to stay occupied with other activities that do not involve Tavis.]

Making Behavioral Approaches Work in Office Visits

Below we highlight several tips to use when trying brief behavioral interventions and point out some common missteps that occur.

Tip 1: Emphasize rewards where possible. Criminal justice agencies often focus on sanctions or punishments to dissuade behavior to the exclusion of incentives; however, sanctions are not always effective for changing behaviors and/or attitudes. Evidence-based practices suggest a ratio of incentives to sanctions of about 4 to 1 (Wodahl et al., 2011). This means that positive reinforcers for behavior change must be identified and used as much as possible. Positive reinforcers can include small things such as a compliment or case note about the person's progress, to more formal actions such as a reduction in community service hours, or early discharge from probation. From a behavioral standpoint, threats and sanctions should only occupy a small role in the case plan.

Tip 2: Individualize case plans and interventions; Avoid a one-size-fits-all "cookie cutter" approach. Analyzing discreet behavioral events that unfold naturally in the client's life is at the heart of a behavioral approach. Interventions are then tailored to a particular problem, person, and situational context (Hofmann & Hayes, 2019). Obviously,

many clients will have similar risk factors (e.g., problematic friends) but addressing that specific area will differ at least slightly from client to client based on their reinforcement history and response to new reinforcers.

Tip 3: Be consistent and immediate in offering rewards/punishers. Change agents will sometimes delay a reward for a targeted behavior until the behavior seems "set in stone," or postpone a punisher "to wait and see how things shake out next time." But rewards and punishers work most effectively when they are applied consistently and when they are applied soon after the target behavior. The practice of delaying and/or inconsistently applying rewards/punishers only serves to undermine the power of reinforcement contingencies.

Tip 4: Pay attention to your own nonverbal cues to ensure that your interpersonal style isn't becoming a sanction. Nonverbal behaviors (e.g., rolling eyes, facial expressions of disapproval, closed body language) can inadvertently interfere with reinforcements. Nonverbal behaviors can send signals that the officer disapproves of the client, which may affect the working relationship. When clients express/engage in antisocial or self-destructive thoughts/behaviors, POs need to be mindful that it is sometimes best if their internal reactions of frustration and disappointment remain below the surface.

Tip 5: Clarify the client's readiness and capacity to meet a behavioral goal before it's set. Not all clients are equally motivated, have the intellectual know-how, or are capable of managing their own behavior to the same degree. Recognizing an individual's motivation and capability to change can help establish a realistic goal, as well as the appropriate rewards/punishers that will affect the behavior change.

Tip 6: Attend to basic needs that drive behavior. Often, behavior is driven by basic needs such as food, housing, employment, or the desire to be a good spouse/parent/friend. Recognizing these needs can go a long way to facilitating behavior change. Survival needs often interfere with decision-making due to food insecurity, lack of housing, financial stress, and absence of social supports. Attending to these basic needs can help clients address other issues.

Second Wave: An Emphasis on Cognitions

From a *second wave* perspective, it is thinking that directs criminal behavior. Therefore, the goal of forensically oriented cognitive

interventions is to (1) change the thinking patterns that drive criminal decisions, and (2) increase thinking that leads to productive decisions and prosocial outcomes (Morgan et al., 2018; Tafra et al., 2018).

The second wave traces its origin to the ancient Stoic Greek and Roman philosophers (e.g., Zeno, Seneca, Epictetus) who believed that disturbances in emotion and behavior could be changed by testing one's thoughts through evidence and logic. These ideas were later formalized by Ellis (1957, 1962) and Beck (1963, 1967) into a set of intervention procedures. Ellis's model became known as rational emotive behavior therapy and Beck's model became cognitive therapy. A related intervention, known as self-instructional training, emphasizes verbal self-statements as a means of directing new behaviors and interrupting learned maladaptive patterns by replacing them with more adaptive internal self-instructions (Meichenbaum & Cameron, 1973). Currently, the term "cognitive restructuring" is frequently used to describe interventions that target thinking and self-talk. A quote attributed to the Roman stoic philosopher Epictetus (55-135 C.E.) is frequently cited to emphasize the spirit of the cognitive approach: "Men are not disturbed by things, but by the views which they take of them" (Higginson, 1890).

Understanding the impact that specific thinking patterns have on decisions to engage in criminal behavior is at the centerpiece of forensic case planning. In this way of working, thought patterns are viewed as the stimulus that influences clients' reactions. Interventions are designed to weaken the kind of thinking that leads to risky/criminal decisions and to develop and strengthen the kind of thinking that results in non-criminal outcomes.

Common interventions from this wave include self-monitoring (becoming aware of thoughts that occur prior to poor decisions); exploring the accuracy, evidence, and functionality of certain cognitive "rules" and "assumptions" (e.g., "My life must always be exciting" or "I have nothing in common with people living a conventional life"); developing specific self-statements that clients can use to guide behavior in challenging situations (e.g., "Let it go. He wants to fight and I'm on probation. I don't want to go back to jail. Just walk away."); and fostering improved problem-solving skills when faced with challenges (e.g., considering alternatives, thinking through consequences, choosing the option most likely to produce a positive outcome).

Applying a Cognitive Approach to the Case Example

In this sample dialog, the officer challenges the client's view that he is "not a good friend" if he chooses not to hang out with his companion on weekend nights. The office visit ends with an example of what the client can say to himself when he is tempted to engage in behavior likely to lead to legal problems.

PO: What's going through your mind when Tavis asks you to hang out on Friday or Saturday nights?

Client: Well, I want to say no. But I also don't want to turn my back on him.

PO: Walk me through your thought process. What goes through your mind when you consider saying no?

Client: I'm worried he will think I'm lame or that I don't care about him.

PO: Do you think Tavis is a real friend and cares about you and wants what's best for you?

Client: Yes. But not always. Sometimes he can be selfish.

PO: When you got in trouble last time, was Tavis there to help you? Did he help you with money? Calm things down with your family? Talk to you about what happened in court?

Client: No. He just texted me afterwards to keep hanging out, like nothing happened.

PO: Even though he is a friend and does some good things, it doesn't sound like Tavis is always concerned about what's best for you. He's thinking more about himself. So, the next time you say no to hanging out with him, how can you counter your own thoughts that you are not a caring friend?

Client: I guess I could tell myself that I'm trying to make changes in my own life—getting in trouble isn't who I want to be, and it could have bad consequences for me. If Tavis was a good friend, he would respect that. Also, I'm not cutting him out of my life. I can still hang with him at times.

PO: That's good insight. So, the next time you get a text to hang out with Tavis on a Friday or Saturday night, I want you to

take the time before saying "no" to have a discussion with yourself about why you are saying no. Challenge the thought that you are abandoning your friend by saying "no," and encourage yourself to remember your reasons for making changes in your life. What are some things you could say to yourself to reinforce a better way of thinking when you feel under pressure hang out with him?

Client: Oh, like stuff I can say to myself.

PO: Yes. Exactly.

Client: I could say that I'm trying to change my life for the better and if I'm not careful he can drag me down. He won't help me when things go bad. I'm not abandoning him. Also, if I get my life on track, I'll be better able to help him.

PO: Wow! All excellent points.

[PO and client practice self-statements to use when responding to texts from Tavis. Future office visits would focus on new thinking and self-statements to help guide the client to leave situations with Tavis when a new arrest seems likely.]

Making Cognitive Approaches Work in Office Visits

Below we highlight some tips to get brief cognitive interventions off to a good start.

Tip 1: Maintain a positive (or at least neutral) attitude and delivery style. Conversations about clients' views of themselves and others can sometimes take on a tone of scolding, arguing, or ridiculing, especially when the client expresses criminogenic thinking. In this case, the style itself can cause the client to disengage in the process. Although cognitive interventions are traditionally described as "active-directive" (led by the practitioner), they still assume that clients are engaged in the conversation and collaborating with the PO to identify better ways of thinking. When clients feel judged and get defensive, the opportunity to explore both criminogenic and healthier ways of thinking diminishes. Being upbeat and nonjudgmental can give clients the safety to say what's really on their mind.

Tip 2: Elicit and collaborate. Don't lecture and interrogate. The original models of Ellis and Beck emphasized Socratic questioning that helps clients reflect on their own

thought processes. This requires open-ended questions that elicit the client's thoughts and decisions, and reflections (repeating back the gist of what the person is saying) that help clients hear their thoughts in a different way. Rapid-fire closed-ended questions can produce an atmosphere of interrogation that shuts down communication. Similarly, we have seen well-meaning POs shut down cognitive interventions because they adopt a purely didactic, lecturing style that puts the client in the back seat. An emphasis on shared decision-making—with the client in the driver's seat, and you as the navigator—can help to build interest and engagement.

Tip 3: Make manualized or scripted interventions your own. POs may sometimes follow manualized or scripted cognitive interventions (e.g., programs such as Carey guides; CBT with Justice-Involved Clients). Scripts are useful for launching into productive conversations and providing a structure for focused and efficient sessions. But it is important to try to deliver scripted material in a way that is as natural as possible. Being too bound to scripts can result in a loss of the flexibility that is useful in real-world discussions. Scripts and manuals are best viewed as starting points, like training wheels on a bicycle. With practice and repetition, POs will become more natural and competent in using CBT interventions. We also recommend, when initially using scripts, that POs tell clients they are trying out a new worksheet and will be looking at the worksheet while interacting with the client. We have never received a client objection when a new activity is presented in this manner.

Third Wave: An Emphasis on Mindfulness and Values

From a *third wave* perspective, criminal behavior results from unskilled attempts to fulfill personal values and cope with life's challenges. Thus, antisocial and self-destructive behaviors are the result of strategies clients adopt in pursuit of their values. With repetition, these strategies become entrenched and automatic as people navigate their lives.

The third wave interventions incorporate elements of Buddhist philosophy and emphasize mindful awareness and values-based actions (Hayes, 2008). The best-known model in this area is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). The acronym ACT stands for (A)cccept thoughts and feelings, (C)hoose directions, and (T)ake action (Hayes & Smith, 2005). The focus is not on eliminating or changing one's thoughts and feelings, but

rather on learning to accept those thoughts and feelings as they are, while only acting on those that will move the client in a productive direction. The identification of the client's personal values is used to establish anchor points to guide future behavioral choices. This in turn helps the client to develop behavioral activation plans that will lead to a happier and more meaningful life (Amrod & Hayes, 2014).

Embedded in third wave principles is the idea that people do not—and do not have to—act on every thought, emotion, or urge. In fact, during a typical day, all of us have impulses that do not automatically translate into behaviors (e.g., “I’m hungry” or “I wish he would shut up” or “I’d love to take a nap right now,” etc.). From a third wave perspective, the problem is less about the thoughts and more about behavioral expression (e.g., “This is a frustrating situation and I’m angry. Maybe I should take a quick ‘time out’ before I decide what to do.”). This is particularly relevant in areas like substance use, sexual attraction to children, and problematic anger reactions. Probation clients may have destructive internal impulses (e.g., thoughts, feelings, and urges) without needing to act on them. Other foundational principles include the idea that everyone has at least some underlying prosocial values, and alignment of those values with behaviors will reduce the risk of future criminality (Fortune & Ward, 2014).

In this way of working, POs take the time to explore what clients want out of life. Case planning is centered around identifying values and life priorities. Values are big life directions that require ongoing attention across a lifetime (e.g., being a nurturing and involved parent, excelling at work, being actively involved in community organizations, maintaining physical health). Common interventions from this wave include values clarification; acceptance of difficult thoughts, emotions, and urges; exploring the degree to which everyday decisions are consistent with core values; and fostering values-based actions (setting goals that are consistent with values). From a wave three philosophy, a meaningful life is defined by deliberately living in accordance with one's own values.

Applying a Mindfulness/Values Approach to the Case Example

While mindfulness/values approaches can seem unfamiliar, in this brief sample dialog, exploring the connection between values and behaviors leads naturally to a productive conversation.

PO: So it seems like friendship is something that you care about. [value]

Client: Yes. Very much.

PO: What else do you value?

Client: I guess family. It's important to me that I do right by them. I also value my future. I want to have a career and my own family someday. Getting in trouble just takes me further away from those things.

PO: So how does hanging out with Tavis during weekend nights undermine your value of family and your future goals?

Client: If I follow his lead and get in trouble again, my family will be disappointed in me. They may stop supporting me. Also, getting arrested again sure doesn't help my future.

PO: Our goal is to bring your values and everyday decisions into alignment. You value friendship, family, and your future. But what I hear you saying is that sometimes the friendship with Tavis can be in conflict with those values. I want you to be mindful of these values, and to think about actions you can take that will support all of them. Are there ways you can be a good friend while also doing right by your family and your future?

Client: Yes. I can still be there for Tavis and listen to him when he needs to vent. But I can't go hang with him at times when he wants to do stuff that can lead to getting arrested.

PO: That makes sense. It's important to remember the temptation to seem like a good friend by joining him when he asks will often be there. But it's also important to remember that you do not need to automatically act on those thoughts—in the moment—because it doesn't align with your other values. Your family and your future are also important. You've got to balance those things.

[In subsequent office visits, PO and client discuss everyday decisions that are consistent with the values of family and future and those that are not, emphasizing decisions that support the client's valued life directions.]

Making Mindfulness and Values Approaches Work in Office Visits

Below we highlight several tips to get values conversations off to a good start.

Tip 1: Focus on approach (rather than avoidance) goals. In community corrections, it is common to focus on stopping or reducing negative behaviors (e.g., lying, skipping school, quitting jobs, hanging out with certain friends, and so on). This usually means increasing client awareness of the costs of actions and pursuing a series of avoidance goals. However, this begs the question: If clients are not engaging in self-defeating activities, what will they be doing instead? Helping clients develop a better life requires awareness of “approach” goals, for instance adopting new behaviors, social groups, hobbies, etc. Working from this perspective helps to identify positive steps clients can take to live their lives in line with their core values.

Tip 2: Use values clarification exercises to explore client inconsistencies, but resist the urge to say “gotcha.” There is sometimes a temptation for POs to point out an inconsistency between what clients state they value and their actual actions. This can take on a “gotcha” feel that focuses on the person's character, as opposed to the behavior (e.g., “If you really valued being a good parent, then you wouldn't have been on the street corner.”). Rather than pointing out contradictions, a more useful stance is to help clients explore the degree to which their actions are taking them in the direction they truly want (e.g., “How did that fit with your obligation as a parent?” or “Considering that you value being a good parent, what would you do differently in the future?”). This allows clients to identify inconsistencies on their own and fosters internal motivation for change.

Tip 3: Link mindfulness/values activities to risk-relevant behaviors. In some forensic programs, clients are taught mindfulness skills such as yoga or transcendental meditation, or they may be asked to engage in spiritual practices. While these efforts may be useful, they are not by themselves considered a form of CBT, nor could they be expected on their own to reduce reoffending. Third-wave CBT, in the forensic arena, is not simply a recommendation that clients engage in various forms of mindfulness. Instead, mindfulness and values-based activities are adapted to counter patterns related to the client's offending history. Returning to the case example, a values-oriented discussion was used to aid the client in distancing from an antisocial companion.

Conclusion

CBT is a big umbrella that contains different ways of thinking about change. We offer a review of three historical waves that clarify the underlying principles of CBT approaches and provide examples of how they might look in a probation context. Within each wave there are multiple CBT interventions; it's not necessary to stick to only one CBT approach. They can be used alongside one another or combined with other treatment approaches (e.g., motivational interviewing). Once POs become familiar with different CBT techniques, they can be delivered flexibly; CBT does not have to be overly manualized. Interventions from different waves can be combined; however, we recommend introducing different techniques gradually over the course of multiple office visits (doing too much within one meeting can dilute the intended effects of any one intervention).

The migration of CBT techniques from the mental health arena to probation office visits is a relatively new phenomenon. Current adaptations of CBT to community corrections rest on the foundation of the three intellectual waves discussed in this article. Although CBT-oriented probation is still in its infancy, the techniques will continue to be adapted and refined to reduce criminal behavior and improve probation outcomes. When officers understand the advantages of different CBT approaches, they will be better able to choose the specific techniques that will be of most benefit to their clients.

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