THE INTRICACIES OF INference CHAINING

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ABSTRACT: This article describes some of the common errors made in inference chaining by novice as well as experienced REBTers. These errors are presented in a three stage process: first, false starts in initiating the chain; second, going deeper into the chain but following the wrong path caused by inattention to client data signposting the right one; third, stopping short of the critical A because of insufficient refinement of the activating event. Then we present the complete inference chain with annotations showing how the aforementioned mistakes can be avoided. Finally, we suggest that inference chaining does not have to be a daunting prospect but its successful execution usually requires more than just REBT training.

Since Moore (1983) formally introduced inference chaining into the literature on the ABC assessment of clients' presenting problems, it has developed into a minor art form culminating in Dryden's (1995) variations on an inference chain. Inference chaining is a technique which links the client's personally significant inferences about an activating event (A) in order to find the one (sometimes called the critical A) which triggers the client's irrational belief (B) which then, in turn, directly leads to his emotional reaction at C. This technique combines speed with depth in rapidly taking clients from the periphery to the centre of their emotional disturbance by a series of carefully crafted 'Let's assume... then what?' questions. Inference chaining can be an exceedingly difficult procedure to carry out and therefore this article...
will focus on the common pitfalls and errors that REBTers, novice and experienced alike, make when attempting it.

GETTING STARTED

Skimming the Surface

Once the REBT therapist has a reasonably clear idea of the presenting problem, elicited an unhealthy negative emotion (in this transcript, anger) that the client experiences about the problem and has begun teaching him (in this case example) the principle of emotional responsibility, i.e. that he largely disturbs himself about adverse events in his life or B-C thinking, she is ready to start the chain. Usual mistakes in beginning inference chaining include strengthening the client's A-C thinking, i.e. that others or events directly cause his emotional disturbance, providing reassurance prematurely, disputing the client's inferences rather than waiting for irrational beliefs to emerge, switching the focus from one disturbed emotion to another before closure has been achieved with the first one, terminating the chaining process before it has got properly underway:

Therapist: What was it that your boss said that made you angry?
Client: (clenching his teeth and fists) He said I was incompetent for failing to clinch a deal that went to a rival firm. (emphasizing) He said it in front of my colleagues.
Therapist: And that made you angry?
Client: Yeah, that was part of it.
Therapist: What evidence do you have that your boss really believes you are incompetent? After all, you have secured many contracts for your firm.
Client: Well he said it, so he probably means it.
Therapist: He could have said it because he lost face in the eyes of the management board, or he's under too much stress. It could be anything really.
Client: I suppose so.
Therapist: How do you feel about your boss seeing you as incompetent?
Client: I feel hurt because I work so hard for my boss and therefore he shouldn't treat me like this.