Writing Effective Therapeutic Goals to Monitor Progress and Make Data-Driven Decisions

Clayton R. Cook, PhD, LP

Associate Professor
School Psychology, College of Education & Human Development
University of Minnesota
Core Faculty
Institute for Translational Research in Children’s Mental Health

Key Point

A direct treatment protocol is used to document the specific therapeutic interventions, strategies, and supports for students whose behavior requires systematic treatment from a mental health service provider due to the emotionally-driven nature of the problem. It is a supplement to the BIP.
Key Point

The direct treatment protocol encourages collaboration across stakeholders including parents, outside therapists, site administrators, program managers, probation officers, behaviorists, teachers, and others concerned with the emotional and behavioral health of the student.
Emotions 101

Three key criteria that define an emotion:

- They represent an **internal subjective experience** that combines bodily and cognitive reactions
- They **occur in response to a real or imagined event** and are designed to **provide us information**
- They **motivate or urge** specific types of behavior or actions

Emotion Dysregulation

- The emotional system overwhelms the cognitive, rationale thinking part of the brain
- A person loses access to other skills, with the main motivation being to avoid, escape or put an end to an unwanted situation
Emotion Dysregulation Impairment

- Internal distress that involves unpleasant or aversive experience, such as fear, anger, sorrow, guilt, sadness, and hate that motivates someone to engage in behaviors to experience relief from and minimizing contact with a specific situation or thought (i.e., experiential avoidance)

- External behavioral manifestations of the emotions that negatively impact self, others or the environment

Goal Writing Therapeutic Interventions

- Improvements in subjective indicators of distress and wellbeing
  - Mood meters (aka, subjective units of discomfort)
    - Measure energy levels
    - Measure degree of pleasantness or distress

From the RULER Program - http://ei.yale.edu/ruler/ruler-overview/
Tell us about your Energy level. When I say energy level, what I mean is how charged up you are. Like a battery, sometimes we feel really charged up so we have lots of energy. When we're full of energy, we often have a need to move and do things. Other times we feel like our battery charge is low and we move a bit slower, we're tired, and we don't feel like doing much. We can also be somewhere in the middle. Mark an “X” next to the line that best captures your current energy level. On one end, energy is low and the other end is energy is really high.

Tell us about how pleasant you feel. When I say pleasant I mean happy and peaceful. When we feel really pleasant we feel really good, smile and are having fun. When we don’t feel pleasant we might frown and feel sad, angry, or super bored. We can also feel somewhere in the middle. Mark an “X” next to the line that best captures your current pleasantness level.

Try to get used to rating your distress on a scale of 0 – 100. Imagine you have a “distress thermometer” that is sensitive to your current state of wellbeing and the amount of distress you are experiencing in the moment. Using the following scale, rate how you feel right now. Notice how your level of distress changes over time and in different situations.

**SUOS: The Fear Thermometer**

| 100 | Highest distress you have ever felt, overwhelmed |
| 90  | Extremely distressed, exhausted               |
| 80  | Very distressed, unable to concentrate        |
| 70  | Quite distressed, interfering with performance|
| 60  | Moderate distress, uncomfortable but can continue to perform |
| 50  | Mild distress, no interference on performance |
| 40  | Minimal distress                             |
| 30  | Pretty relaxed, concentrating well            |
| 20  |                                             |
| 10  | Totally relaxed                             |
| 0   |                                             |
Goal Writing Therapeutic Interventions

- Use of emotional regulation skills and strategies learned as part of the therapeutic intervention
  - Relaxation strategies
  - De-escalation strategies
  - Coping strategies
    - Mindfulness technique, self-talk, distraction tactic, self-soothing
  - Problem-solving skills
    - Define the problem situation, generate solutions to situation, and select and enact the best solution
  - Cognitive restructuring
    - Identifying unhelpful thoughts and spinning / repurposing them to be helpful

Goal Writing Therapeutic Interventions

- Improvements in desired behavior when confronted with the emotion-provoking trigger (i.e., ability to go on the upper pathway)

3. Setting Events
   Must be periodic, Not continuous!
   Poor sleep and bad mood the night before

2. Triggering Antecedents
   Getting ready to leave the house to go to school

1. Problem Behavior
   Tantrums: flailing, hitting and kicking, saying "I want to die"

5. Desired Alternative

6. Typical Consequence

4. Maintaining Consequences
   Avoid going to school

Key question:
Can the student go on the upper pathway when faced with the trigger?
Goal Writing Therapeutic Interventions

- Use of the socially acceptable functionally-equivalent replacement behavior as a temporary fix to the problem when confronted with the emotion-provoking trigger (i.e., ability to go on the lower pathway)

3. Setting Events
   Must be periodic, Not continuous!
   Poor sleep and bad mood the night before

2. Triggering Antecedents
   Getting ready to leave the house to go to school

1. Problem Behavior
   Tantrums: flailing, hitting and kicking, saying "I want to die"

4. Maintaining Consequences
   Avoid going to school

7. Acceptable FERB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By when will criteria be goal attainment be assessed (This is the final date to determine if the goal/objective has been met)</td>
<td>The student</td>
<td>Specify what the student will do that is observable and measurable. The &quot;will do&quot; should be teachable or alterable skills or behaviors. These skills or behaviors should be observable and measurable to allow for adequate progress monitoring.</td>
<td>Under what conditions (What variables are present? Examples: in what location, during what activity, with what staff)</td>
<td>At what level of proficiency, (Examples: number of times, % correct, % of observations, frequency of behaviors)</td>
<td>Who will measure mastery? Specify specifically who will observe and record. What materials are necessary? Specify all materials necessary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>