

Integrating Pop Culture Icons Into CBT With Young Patients

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Bruce Wayne/Batman: I wanted to save Gotham. I failed.

Alfred Pennyworth: Why do we fall sir? So that we can learn to pick ourselves up.

Batman Begins (2005)

Self-doubt is an equal opportunity emotional villain. In Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy,¹⁻³ Batman/Bruce Wayne is portrayed as a vulnerable individual combatting multiple adversities. The dialogue above between Bruce Wayne/Batman and his trusted butler Alfred, illustrates the universality of self-doubt, as well as the power of persistence and resilience. Failure is inevitable and cannot be absolutely avoided, but it also provides us with lessons for how to rise up after life's hard knocks strike us down. Popular culture heroes such as Dory from *Finding Nemo*,⁴ characters like Riley from *Inside Out*,⁵ and Batman all model endurance in the face of distress. They all keep calm and carry on!

Coping skills training is fundamental to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Finding creative ways to teach these skills via covert modeling and metaphors is a nice augmentation to the traditional approach. Covert modeling takes place in the mind's eye, so imagination is critical. Children envision a valued person dealing with some hardship and then mentally picture themselves imitating the model's coping behavior. The best type of covert model is one who is flawed and struggles but perseveres in managing mishaps.⁶ Batman, Riley, and Dory are prime examples of coping models, and the lessons they teach young patients are described below.

Inside Out: Riley, Emotional Awareness, and Acceptance Save the Day!

Taking place in the mind of an eleven-year-old girl named Riley, Pixar's *Inside Out* provides a vivid portrayal of the way emotions serve survival functions. Throughout the

movie, the Feelings, adapted as their own characters of Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust, struggle to support Riley in coping with moving to a new city. The Feelings all work in the Headquarters Control Console to help Riley emotionally navigate the rough waters associated with relocation.

Integrating the lessons taught by *Inside Out* with CBT concepts is an extremely easy task. One of the foundational skills of CBT with youth is providing psychoeducation. Joy, Sadness and the rest of the Feelings personify different moods through state-of-the-art animations and clever depictions of prototypical situations. Utilizing movie clips, clinicians can demonstrate how each emotion is linked to related automatic thoughts and actions. For example, the scene where Riley is walking into her new school for the first time is an excellent depiction of a common stressor. All of the Feelings weigh in on the experience. Fear predicts catastrophe, Disgust reacts to the "cool girls," Sadness sparks homesickness, and Joy tries to modulate and put a positive spin on things. Once a child is familiar with spotting the stressor, clinicians can direct attention to emotions, invite young patients to draw their own Fear or Disgust characters, and then place the emotion in their "headquarters." Furthermore, *Inside Out* communicates that all emotions are acceptable, cognitive structuring modulates aversive states, and facing distress is preferable to avoiding it.

Riley's memories are often reframed throughout the movie, teaching young patients that events are interpreted in many different ways and are associated with the dominant emotions. For example, during a hockey game, Sadness remembers that Riley missed the winning goal and the team lost the championship game. Yet, when Joy is activated, Riley reframes the event by remembering the support and love she

felt from her family and teammates. Through these examples, *Inside Out* fuels the application of cognitive restructuring concepts.

The Dark Knight Helps Us Rise and Build the Will to Act

Batman is an especially fitting superhero because he is so imperfectly human. His identity is forged in tragedy, and trauma is burned into his neural connections. Randall M. Jensen wrote:

Origin stories are typically driven by incredible and fantastic events: genetic mutations, strange laboratory accidents, alien encounters, dealings with the devil and so on. But Batman's beginnings are different! The crucial catalyst—an alleyway mugging gone bad—is all too ordinary.⁷

Because Batman is so completely human, he must rely on his knowledge, flexibility, resourcefulness, and relationships to handle misfortune. Batman's humanity makes him a strong covert coping model, and his tools are proper metaphors for coping skills training.

For instance, let's take the case of nine-year-old Edgar, who exhibited externalizing behaviors, relying on tantrumming, yelling, and other disruptive behaviors to attract his parents' attention. He believed that people should never feel frustrated or see themselves as thwarted. For him, these feelings were beyond the realm of "human" experiences. Coping with these unpleasant thoughts and feelings was an overwhelming task requiring extraordinary skills. Fortunately, he was a huge Batman fan, so making the link to a human superhero seemed like a natural strategy. The therapist and Edgar discussed Batman's adversities, frustrations, anger, and failures, as well as the way he humanly coped with them. Subsequently, the therapist and Edgar made a stencil cut-out of the Bat signal and placed it over the lens of a flashlight. Together, they practiced shining the Bat signal whenever he wanted his

parents' attention instead of engaging in his previously maladaptive behavior.

While many superheroes have special tools such as a lasso (Wonder Woman), hammer (Thor), shield (Captain America), and ring (Green Hornet), Batman's utility belt is filled with manufactured gadgets that are not supernatural in power and are used by a distinct human being. Consequently, we think Batman's utility belt is also an apt metaphor for cognitive behavioral coping skills training. Using this utility belt metaphor in practice can be seen with the example of Micah, a 10-year-old boy who was diagnosed with persistent depression. He saw himself as "low down," "a loser," and "lame." He was the target of verbal teasing by peers and commonly internalized these insults. He felt helpless and unable to cope with distress and difficulties. The therapist knew Micah idolized Batman and then elected to use the utility belt as a metaphor. Over the course of treatment, Micah and his therapist built a number of coping strategies (eg, self-instruction, problem-solving, reattribution, and problem-solving) and organized them into various compartments in his "coping utility belt" according to the different situations where the skills were needed (eg, home, gym class, lunch, bus). Batman helped Micah rise!

Batman represents a coping model who is able to face distress and endure despite adversities,⁸ making him a fitting model for practicing exposure. In *Batman Begins*, a major theme is developing *the will to act*. Willingness is essential when coaching children through exposure treatment. In fact, employing a scene from *Batman Begins* to teach exposure to young patients in individual and group work is a favorite strategy. Bruce Wayne returns to the scene of an earlier trauma where he was terrified of bats. He willingly embraces being surrounded by these flying creatures, tolerating and eventually welcoming the experience. Patients identify with Batman and learn that even superheroes experience anxiety and that facing fear is a bold tactic.

Finding Nemo: Just Keep Swimming!

Dory: Hey, Mr. Grumpy Gills. When life gets you down do you wanna know what you've gotta do?

Marlin: No, I don't wanna know.

Dory: [singing] Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming. What do we do? We swim, swim.

Finding Nemo (2003)

Another popular character that brings CBT interventions to life is the blue tang fish, Dory, who captured viewers' hearts in *Finding Nemo*. Dory's optimistic, determined, and hopeful attitude help push her forward despite major obstacles. Dory is not perfect—her struggles with memory significantly interfere with her ability to maintain friendships and lead a “normal” life. Despite this deficit, Dory commits herself to her pursuits and accomplishes goals that seemed initially impossible. This is an important lesson for youth who feel helpless, demonstrate distorted negative thinking, or are pained by their imperfections. When mired in depression, anxiety, or bombarded by psychosocial stressors, it is easy to feel defeated and lose motivation. Incorporating Dory into treatment as a covert model inspires young patients to persist in the face of adversity.

Finding Nemo offers various metaphors for teaching young patients about self-instruction. During her various adventures and misadventures, Dory did not reach her goal in one step. Rather, her experiences were a series of hits and misses that built a path towards success. Further, Dory is best known for her personal motto: “Just keep swimming!” which enabled her to persist despite adversities. Her catchphrase is well-suited for teaching cognitive coping skills to distressed youngsters. Clinical experience indicates that young patients seem to love to chant this statement! In addition to motivating young patients to endure and carry on, this declaration generates positive affect and hopefulness. Constructing coping thoughts can also be accomplished by writing or drawing coping cards that say “What would Dory do?” In this way, patients come to view their life experience as an expedition.

Dory is an apt model for social skills training. She rarely keeps friends for long and is repeatedly building new relationships. By playing brief video clips of Dory as she interacts with new characters, clinicians are able to break down social skills into discrete, simple elements that are easily understood by young patients. Additionally, many young patients are hesitant to rely on others, believing they must manage things alone; others do not understand how to determine the right time to seek support. Using Dory's friends as examples, clinicians are able to help youth identify who in their lives is Marlin (a best friend), Crush (an expert), Hank (someone needing help in return), and Destiny (a specialist). Young patients quickly grasp these concepts and the roles people in their lives play.

Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating popular culture icons into traditional CBT with young patients is strongly recommended. Pop culture characters are engaging and fun! We strongly recommend integrating popular culture icons into traditional CBT with young patients. Nevertheless, the research cupboard evaluating the approach's efficacy and effectiveness is relatively bare. Certainly, basic efficacy studies examining traditional CBT procedures compared to pop-culture augmented CBT is necessary. Further, interesting and clinical findings have historically guided basic efficacy research. Ideally, this will be the case with CBT and pop culture icons. Until then, CBT oriented clinicians are urged to carefully experiment with the use of popular culture metaphors making sure they are relevant to young patients' experiences and sociocultural contexts.

Take Home Summary

CBT with young patients can be challenging and integrating popular culture icons into the treatment approach can be helpful. Using characters from *Inside Out*, *Batman*, and *Finding Nemo* may engage young patients in psychoeducation, cognitive restructuring, and exposure procedures.

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