

A Brief Description of  
**COGNITIVE SELF CHANGE**

An introduction for program facilitators and others

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*We are what we think.  
All that we are arises with our thoughts.  
With our thoughts we make the world.  
Speak or act with an impure mind  
And trouble will follow you  
As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.*

Dhammapada  
The Sayings of the Buddha

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## 1. The Steps of Cognitive Self Change

Cognitive Self Change is a cognitive-behavioral treatment program for criminal and violent offenders. It is based on the idea that offending behavior is grounded in ways of thinking that excuse and justify that behavior.

Cognitive Self Change teaches offenders how to break free of the attitudes and habits of thinking that lead them to offend. With young offenders, this means breaking free of influences that threaten to lead them into a lifetime of crime and violence.

Offenders learn to change their thinking by performing four simple steps:

Step 1: Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings.

Offenders give brief, objective reports of their thoughts and feelings when they committed criminal and violent acts. (These are called, "Thinking Reports.")

Step 2: Recognize how your thoughts and feelings lead you to offend.

Offenders learn to see for themselves the direct connection between how they think and how they act.

Step 3: Imagine new ways to think that would let you feel good about yourself without doing acts of crime or violence.

Offenders learn to see non-criminal ways of living as a personal and genuine possibility.

Step 4: Practice using these new ways of thinking until you get good at it.

Using new thinking in real-life situations—and making it work—is the final step in learning how to steer the course of your own life.

The steps of CSC are taught as skills. CSC does not coerce offenders to "obey the rules," and it is not a "cure" for some imagined "disease." It teaches offenders how to change themselves. Our message to offenders is:

Cognitive Self Change doesn't try to make you change, it teaches you how to change yourself.

When you learn how to steer your thinking away from crime and violence—and to feel good about yourself when you do—you have a real choice to make. If you don't learn these skills your important decisions will have already been made. Your decisions will be made in advance by the attitudes and habits of thinking you perform in your mind automatically, "without thinking."

## 2. Motivation to change

Most serious offenders, young or old, are not motivated to change. They are motivated to offend, and that is exactly the problem. Offenders are likely to resent any attempt to change them. Cognitive Self Change does not try to instill motivation by threats of punishment or promises of a good life. It teaches offenders how to take control of their own lives and points the way to a positive life within the law. It makes living within the law a genuine possibility, and it challenges offenders to choose.

By learning the 4 steps of Cognitive Self Change offenders become objective and truthful observers of their own thoughts and feelings. They learn to see that their behavior—including their criminal behavior—comes from within themselves. They recognize their own responsibility for their actions, and, most importantly, they learn that they can direct their life on a new path. And the process does not end until they learn how to apply the skills of Cognitive Self Change in the actual circumstances of their life.

When offenders in CSC struggle with lingering impulses or desires to stay as they are and continue to commit acts of crime or violence, these impulses and desires become the target of attention. Offenders are challenged to recognize that these desires and impulses are themselves imbedded in attitudes and habits of thinking that are within their control, that they have genuine alternatives, and that responsibility for how they think and feel falls upon themselves.

Offenders are shown paths of escape from the traps of their own thinking, and they are challenged to choose. Offenders see for themselves both their responsibility and their opportunity. They are shown a path to genuine autonomy and self-determination. These are the levers that motivate change.

## 3. Communication and collaboration

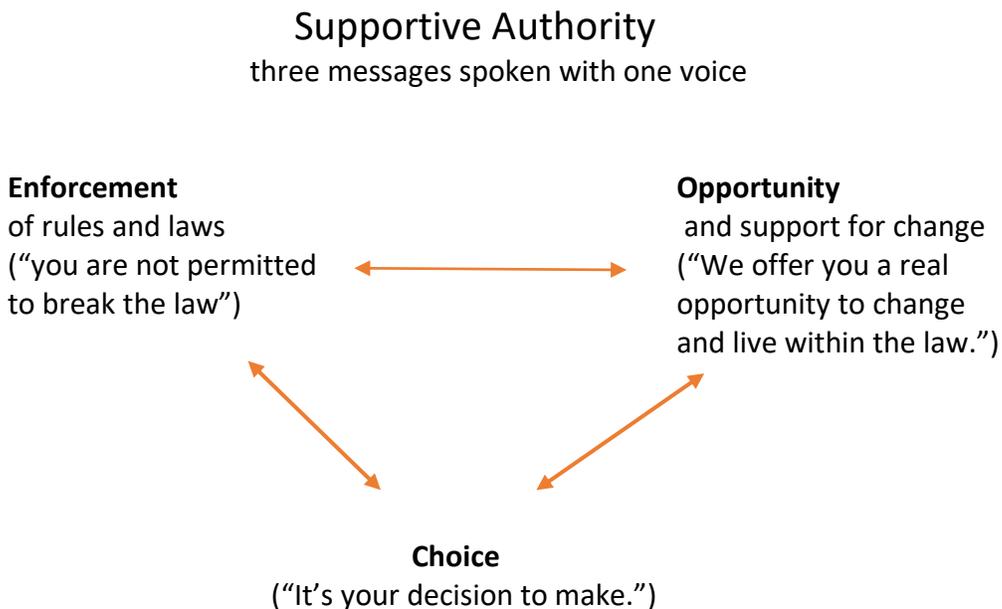
Cognitive Self Change establishes a cooperative working relationship with offenders in treatment. That cooperation is based on three key principles:

**Objectivity.** Facilitators treat offenders' thinking objectively, and they teach offenders to view their own thinking in the same way. We don't judge offenders' thinking as good or evil, healthy or sick, accurate or distorted. We simply observe that thinking as it is, see the connection of that thinking to criminal and violent actions, recognize alternative ways of thinking, and practice using these new ways of thinking.

**Respect.** We respect offenders' freedom and ability to choose for themselves how they think about the world around them, and how they act in relation to that world. (Some would call this a "God-given ability.") The point is that the freedom to exercise their own will at this level is a basic human capacity, possessed by offenders as well as the rest of us. By respecting this freedom, we are acknowledging offenders as fellow human beings.

**Choice.** No matter what we say or do to offenders they remain free, in the privacy of their own minds, to think whatever they want to think—including their thoughts about us and what we are doing to them. But this inability to make offenders change has a positive side: offenders have the ability to change themselves. Rather than attempt to limit offenders’ freedom to choose, Cognitive Self Change challenges offenders to make conscious and deliberate choices. We show offenders how to make each choice a stepping-stone to change.

**4. Supportive authority** Cognitive Self Change supports the authority of the law, provides offenders with a genuine path to change, and respects their freedom to choose. We call this Supportive Authority:



These three messages are not contradictory, they depend on each other. Enforcement without opportunity is oppression. It leads to a hopeless vicious cycle of escalating conflict between offenders and the law. Opportunity without enforcement is license. It leads to lawlessness. And offenders have the freedom to choose their own attitudes, whatever we say or do to them and whether we like it or not. By acknowledging that freedom we are simply acknowledging offenders as fellow human beings.

*Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.*

Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

Cognitive Self Change applies Supportive Authority to uphold high standards of performance in treatment. We define just 2 conditions for participation in the program. These are the only program rules. They are not arbitrary, they are the conditions necessary for the program to work:

**1. Unconditional respect** We show respect for others whether they show respect for us or not.

**2. Honest effort** Everyone is expected to make an honest effort to learn the skills of CSC and to help others do the same.

We enforce these conditions not by threatening punishment but by confronting offenders with a choice. We call this, “the strategy of choices.”

You can accept these conditions and participate in the program, or you can reject them and not participate in the program. That is your choice to make.

But you cannot reject these conditions and continue to participate in the program. That is our choice to make

When and if offenders fail to meet one of these conditions—by being disrespectful or by failing to make an honest effort—they are shown how their behavior fails to meet the conditions of participation and are required to make a new decision: They can re-commit themselves to the conditions of participation and remain in the program, or they can reject these conditions and drop out of the program. Their commitment must be credible, and they will be required to prove by their behavior that their new commitment is genuine, but offenders are always given the opportunity to make a new choice. Offenders that drop out or are removed from the program are, whenever possible, given the opportunity to re-join the program—provided they make a credible commitment to accept the two conditions of participation.

An underlying message of CSC is that change is always possible. There are no “last chances.”

## **5. The group process**

Offenders meet twice a week in groups of up to 8, with 2 staff facilitators, for 6 to 9 months.

The group process focuses exclusively on each member learning the 4 steps of Cognitive Self Change. Members graduate and complete the program when they have met minimum time requirements and have learned and demonstrated the ability to use the 4 Steps of CSC. The group is “open,” meaning that new members can enter the group whenever there is room for them.

New members begin by doing Thinking Reports on past offending behaviors. They first learn to report their thinking objectively, without excuses and without blame. Then they learn to recognize—and explain to the group—how their thinking has led them to their offending actions in the past. Then they learn to imagine new ways of thinking that they can feel good about, but which would not lead them to do criminal or violent acts. Finally, they practice using these new ways of thinking in their real life outside of the group, and report back to the group their successes and failures. They continue to learn and practice until they get good at it.

Each member takes turns reporting to the group. Members report at their own level. All members of the group help all the other members learn whatever step they are working on. All group members are literally “co-facilitators” of the process. Staff facilitators oversee the process to assure it stays on track.

This is what CSC groups do, and it is all that they do. Every group stays sharply focused on the steps of CSC. There are no digressions into story-telling, counseling, advice-giving, problem-solving, or psychotherapy. Strict focus of attention on the performance of each step is key to making the process work.

## **6. The long-term project of change**

Cognitive Self Change is not a singular cure. For some offenders it will be enough: they will use their new skills to lead lives without crime or violence. For others the pressures and stresses of their life will overpower their resolve to change. Some will relapse into habits of the past. But relapse need not be total, and the skills of Cognitive Self Change will help many such offenders catch themselves before they fall too far. For practically all offenders, the project of change will be a personal challenge for many years to come. It won't be easy. Most will need help and support.

Programs and support systems that teach social, academic, and employment skills and provide healthy social environment are invaluable to offenders in the process of change. Cognitive Self Change will work hand in hand with these programs to make change a real and lasting possibility.

## **7. Evidence and references**

Cognitive-behavioral treatment programs have proven in general to reduce recidivism on the order of 25 to 35%. Cognitive Self Change has been shown to fall at the higher end of this range. It should be cautioned that single outcome studies embrace many variables that may or may not be replicated in other studies. Variables such as personal characteristics of facilitators, the environment in which treatment is delivered, and many accidental circumstances can be crucial to the effectiveness of treatment. The question of treatment effectiveness is not just, what works? but, what can we make work? Supervision to assure quality of practice is essential to an effective treatment program.

The following publications describe Cognitive Self Change and its outcomes:

Bush, J., Harris, D., and Parker, R., *Cognitive Self Change: How Offenders Experience the World and What We Can Do About It*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.

This book is a comprehensive description of Cognitive Self Change, its historical background, and the process of delivery.

Bush, J. and Bilodeau, B., *Options: A Cognitive Change Program*, The National Institute of Corrections, Longmont, Colorado, 1993.

This is a program manual. *Options* is an early version of Cognitive Self Change.

Henning, K. and Frueh, B., "Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Incarcerated Offenders: an evaluation of the Vermont Department of Corrections' Cognitive Self -Change Program," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol. 23 No. 4, December 1996.

This article reports effects on recidivism of the Cognitive Self Change Program for violent offenders in Vermont

Baro, A., "Effects of a Cognitive Restructuring Program on Inmate Institutional Behavior," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol. 26 No. 4, July 1999.

This article reports effects on institutional behavior of a program based on *Options* at Michigan State Reformatory.

Powell, T., Bush, J., and Bilodeau, B., "Vermont's Cognitive Self Change Program: a 15 year review," *Corrections Today*, Vol. 63 No 4, July 2001.

This article describes the history and development of the Cognitive Self Change program in Vermont.

The following publications are broad reviews of the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral programs for offenders:

Lipsey, M., Landenberger, S., and Wilson, S., *Effects of Cognitive-Behavioral Programs for Criminal Offenders*, Campbell Systematic Reviews, August 2007.

This report reviews several cognitive-behavioral programs.

Jolliffe, D., and Farrington, D., *A Systematic Review of the National and International Evidence on the Effectiveness of Interventions with Violent Offenders*, Ministry of Justice Research Series (U.K.), December 2007.

This report reviews programs that target violent behavior.