

COGNITIVE SELF CHANGE

PARTICIPANT HANDBOOK



A guide for program members and others

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The Cognitive Self Change Program described in this handbook is a simplified version of the “Options” program (National Institute of Corrections, 1993) and earlier versions of the Cognitive Self Change Program (Vermont Department of Corrections, 1995 &1997). The simplification is achieved by focusing immediately and directly on the essential skills of Cognitive Self Change. Participants can now enter on-going groups at any time without the need for extensive “orientation” training. We believe this makes the program both more efficient and more effective.

The technique of “thinking reports” originated with Yochelson and Samenow. (Yochelson, S. and Samenow, S., *The Criminal Personality*, Aronson, NY and London, 1976.) That technique has been modified significantly in Cognitive Self Change. The Fearless Criminal Inventory was developed by Steve Woodsum.

Jack Bush
February 2003

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT COGNITIVE SELF CHANGE

1. What is Cognitive Self Change?

Cognitive Self Change can be defined as the ability to direct our lives by deliberately controlling our thinking. The techniques of Cognitive Self Change can be used by practically anyone to change practically any behavior. The Cognitive Self Change Program is designed to teach violent and high risk offenders how to steer their thinking away from violence and crime, and to feel good about themselves when they do it.

Cognitive Self Change consists of 4 thinking skills.

The Four Skills of Cognitive Self Change

- 1) Learn how to pay attention to your thoughts and feelings.
- 2) Learn to recognize when your thoughts and feelings are leading you toward violence or crime.
- 3) Find new thinking that leads you away from crime and violence.
- 4) Practice using it until you can do it when it counts.

The methods used to teach these skills are Thinking Reports, Cognitive Check-ins, and Journal Assignments. These methods are described in the section of this handbook called “The Tools of Cognitive Self Change.”

2. Who takes the program?

Cognitive Self Change is used in a number of jurisdictions around the world. In some areas the program is offered “voluntarily” and in other areas it may be a requirement of probation or parole – or as a requirement to obtain parole.

While it is commonly used for violence, in principle, the Cognitive Self Change Program can help any offender learn how to avoid any kind of offending behavior.

3. How long does the program take?

Cognitive Self Change typically takes around nine months, however many participants may take substantially longer, and others will complete the program in a shorter period.

However, no one completes Cognitive Self Change simply by staying in the program for a given period of time. They must also satisfy the conditions and complete the tasks described in sections 4 and 5, below.

4. What are the rules and conditions required to participate in CSC?

The basic requirements are just those conditions necessary for the program to be effective. These are:

- 1) Attend, be on time, and participate constructively in all group meetings.
- 2) Do assigned tasks.
- 3) Be respectful.
- 4) Maintain an open channel of communication.

Constructive participation means members make a genuine effort to learn and practice the skills of CSC and help other members do the same.

Assigned tasks are described in section 5, below.

Respect is defined as unconditional— meaning that respect for others is practiced in group by everyone toward everyone, whether or not we agree with a person, like them, or approve of them, and whether or not we perceive them to be respectful of us.

An open channel of communication means that group members describe their past criminal and violent behaviors and report the thoughts and feelings connected with these behaviors, without evasion, distortion, minimization, or censorship. It also means they report risk situations and risk thinking in their present life in the same open way.

The program does not attempt to coerce or persuade anyone to accept these conditions. Instead, candidates for the program are challenged to make their own decision to accept these conditions and participate in the program, or reject them and not participate.

5. How does the program measure progress and judge completion?

The goal of CSC is to teach every program member how to use new attitudes and new ways of thinking to steer themselves away from crime and violence. Each program member is assigned a series of tasks designed to teach this ability. Progress in the program is measured by satisfactory completion of these tasks. When all assigned tasks are completed satisfactorily a member is judged to have completed that stage of the program.

Some of these are standard tasks, assigned to everyone. Others are prescribed individually.

Examples of standard tasks assigned to everyone are: Thinking Reports on past acts of violence and crime, presentation of Cognitive Check-ins in group meetings, and development of a Self Risk Management Plan.

Individual tasks target personal areas of risk and personal barriers to learning the skills of CSC. Personal areas of risk and personal barriers to learning CSC are described in “Journal Assignments,” below.

6. What are the groups like?

Groups meet two times a week for 1 to 1-1/2 hours. There are two staff facilitators and 8 group members in each group.

Groups begin with Cognitive Check-ins, where group members take turns applying the skills of Cognitive Self Change to recent situations in their life. Stage I groups then focus on an individual presentation, such as a Thinking Report. Stage II groups generally take the entire group meeting with Cognitive Check-ins.

Cognitive Check-ins, Thinking Reports, and other group presentations are described in "The Tools of Cognitive Self Change".

7. Are the groups confidential?

No. The things you say and do in group will be shared with members of your Program Team. The Program Team includes your Caseworker and other correctional staff.

There are certain requirements for disclosure to legal authorities and certain protections against disclosure to legal authorities. These requirements and protections are defined in the Vermont Department of Corrections' policies on disclosure and confidentiality.

Participants in the program will be required to sign an agreement of understanding regarding confidentiality and disclosure. A copy of this agreement is included at the end of this Handbook.

8. Does the program force participants to change their thinking?

No. That isn't possible and the program doesn't try. The program respects each person's right and ability to decide for themselves how they will live their life. But the program does demand that members *learn how* to change their thinking. And that requires that members practice using the skills of Cognitive Self Change in real life, not just in group. Just as no one can learn how to drive a car without practicing on the road, so members of CSC can't learn the skills of CSC without practicing them in real life situations.

Every member of the program faces their own personal question:
What new thinking can I use to steer away from violence and crime
and feel good about myself when I do?

Answering this question can be very challenging. But it is a personal challenge. It is never a demand to comply with someone else's way of thinking.

It's a goal of Cognitive Self Change that participants in the program make the choice to change or not to change with their eyes wide open. But the program doesn't try to make that choice for them.

Messages of Cognitive Self Change

- We don't try to make you change, but we require that you learn how to change.
- Learning how to change means learning how to use new ways of thinking.
- This takes practice—in real life, not just in group.
- Only after you learn how to change do you have a real choice to make: to use your new skills to re-direct your life or stay the way you are.
- Self change means you steer your own life.

THE TOOLS OF COGNITIVE SELF CHANGE

1. Thinking Reports

Thinking Reports teach group members how to be “objective observers” of their thoughts and feelings, attitudes and beliefs.

Thinking Reports have 4 parts.

Thinking Reports

1. Describe a situation and your behavior in that situation briefly and objectively.
2. List all the thoughts you can remember having in this situation.
3. List all the feelings you can remember having in this situation.
4. List all the attitudes and beliefs that were part of your thinking in this situation.

Thinking Reports are strictly objective. This means they are treated as pure information, with no judgment of whether a person’s thinking is justified or not justified, distorted or not distorted, right or wrong.

Thinking Reports presented in group focus on past acts of violence or crime.

Writing and presenting a Thinking Report in group teaches the first skill of Cognitive Self Change: pay attention to your thoughts and feelings. The same Thinking Report is then used as a starting point to practice the other 3 skills of Cognitive Self Change. Skill 2: recognize exactly how this thinking led you to an act of violence or crime. Skill

3: identify new thinking that would lead you away from violence and crime. Skill 4: use this new way of thinking in real life.

2. Cognitive Check-ins

Cognitive Check-ins are individual reports where group members describe recent situations when they felt some risk or temptation to hurt someone or break a rule. Then they apply the first 3 skills of Cognitive Self Change to that situation.

Cognitive Check-ins

Describe a situation when you felt some risk of hurting someone or breaking a rule. Then answer these questions:

- 1) What were my thoughts and feelings, attitudes and beliefs?
- 2) How could (or how did) my thinking lead me to hurt someone or to break a rule?
- 3) What new thinking did I use (or could I use) to steer away from that kind of behavior?

Group members are expected to give a meaningful Cognitive Check-in at every group meeting. The program does not accept that a member has “nothing to report.” Some degree of risk thinking is part of everyday life. Learning to recognize it and steer away from it is the basic process of Cognitive Self Change.

A new group member’s first Cognitive Check-in will focus only on objectively reporting their thoughts and feelings, attitudes and beliefs (step one). After they learn how to do step 1 well, they will practice identifying how their thinking was leading them toward hurtful or rule-breaking behavior (step two). After they have learned to do steps 1 and 2 well, they will practice identifying new ways of thinking that steer them away from hurtful or rule breaking behavior

(step three). This is an example of the Progression Principle, explained below.

3. Journal Assignments

Journal Assignments are tasks done outside of group that teach the skills of Cognitive Self Change based on each member's personal ways of thinking and acting.

Standard Journal Assignments (assigned to everyone) include:

- a Fearless Criminal Inventory (explained below)
- Thinking Reports on your past acts of violence and crime
- a description of the basic patterns of thinking that led you to do these acts
- a description of new thinking that will lead you away from violence and crime
- a record of the your actual practice of this new thinking
- a Self Risk Management Plan (explained below)

Individual Journal Assignments direct members' attention to special areas of risk in their thinking and challenge them to practice new thinking where it matters most. Individual journal assignments also address personal barriers to learning the skills of CSC. Some common kinds of barriers are:

- A person may not understand the concepts or the vocabulary of Cognitive Self Change.
- A person may be unwilling to even consider changing a particular attitude, belief, or way of thinking. They may find it practically impossible to even imagine another way of thinking.
- A person may find it hard to be objective in observing and reporting their thinking, either because they automatically try to *justify* that thinking or because they automatically

re-live their thoughts and feelings instead of reporting them.

- A person may be willing to practice the skills of CSC in group but unwilling to practice new ways of thinking in real life situations outside of group.
- A person may be so resentful of having to take the program that they refuse to make an honest effort to learn the skills of CSC.

With any of these barriers (and many others) CSC facilitators will work with the individual to design a set of tasks that are within that person's ability and—when successfully completed—will teach that person the skills of CSC.

Also, every member of CSC has their own personal areas of risk: particular kinds of situations that trigger the thoughts and feelings that lead them to offending behavior. These are the most important kinds of situations in which to practice the skills of CSC. Facilitators will work with each individual to design special journal assignments that target each person's high risk situations and high risk thinking.

The facilitator's job is to help every member of the group succeed in the program. The purpose of Journal Assignments is to bring the skills of CSC within the reach of every member. When Journal Assignments are properly designed, the only way for a person to fail in the program is to refuse to do the assigned tasks.

Of course, anyone may refuse to complete any assigned task. Such refusal rejects a basic condition for participating in CSC. The program respects everyone's right to make that choice.

4. The Fearless Criminal Inventory (FCI)

The FCI is a journal assignment assigned to everyone early in Stage I. It consists of a chart listing:

- 1) every time you broke a rule or did something hurtful
- 2) the reason in your mind at the time
- 3) the consequence of doing it

Like Thinking Reports and Cognitive Check-ins, the FCI is a strictly objective report. The purpose of the FCI is to look at your past offending behavior—and the reasons for it in your mind — exactly as you experienced it at the time. The purpose is not to condemn, embarrass or shame.

5. The Self Risk Management Plan (SRMP)

The Self Risk Management Plan is a concrete plan for practicing the skills of Cognitive Self Change in real life situations. It is the final Journal Assignment of Stage I and the basic guideline for practicing the skills of CSC in Stage II.

A Self Risk Management Plan includes these key parts:

- a detailed description of your current offense, the circumstances and the specific thinking that led you to do it
- a summary and general description of your past history of violence and crime, including the kinds of situations where you did these behaviors and the core thinking patterns behind these behaviors
- a description of the new ways of thinking you can use to steer away from violence and crime, the kinds of circumstances where you can practice using them, and the new behaviors that will come out of using these new ways of thinking

Program members with histories of domestic violence, sexual offences, or substance abuse will address these behaviors in their SRMP.

A Self Risk Management Plan is a practical tool, not just a list of ideas on paper:

- You will be required to demonstrate the use of your SRMP in challenging, real-life situations before your complete Stage I.
- You will be required to continue using your SRMP in Stage II.

THE COGNITIVE SELF CHANGE GROUP PROCESS

The purpose of groups

The sole purpose of every group meeting is to help group members learn and practice the skills of CSC.

The role of group members

Every group member is expected to learn and practice the skills of CSC by doing their own assignments and presentations. They are also expected to help other members learn and practice these same skills for themselves. Every group member is literally a “co-facilitator” of the group process.

The role of staff facilitators

Staff facilitators are teachers and “head coaches”. Their role is to teach group members both how to perform the skills of CSC and how to help other members do the same. Like good coaches, staff facilitators set high standards and demand the best possible performance of each member of the team. Like good coaches, their goal is every member’s success.

Guiding principles of CSC group process

1) The Focus Principle:

When the group keeps a sharp focus on practicing the skills of CSC every member learns these skills and the group process is interesting and meaningful to everyone. But digressions and distractions can make the group process confusing and ineffective.

Examples of common digressions and distractions are:

- A group member may *justify* their thoughts and feelings—or *expresses* and *re-live* their thoughts and feelings—rather than report them objectively.
- The group may offer *counseling* and *advice* (“problem solving”) rather than simply help a person practice the skills of Cognitive Self Change.
- The group may *dispute* about whether a person’s thinking is justified or unjustified, distorted or not distorted, right or wrong.

All of the above take attention away from the task at hand, which is just this: to learn and practice the 4 skills of CSC.

2) The Progression Principle:

Each skill of CSC is anchored in the skills that come before it. This means group members need to report their thinking objectively and clearly (skill 1) before they go on to explain how this thinking points them toward crime or violence (skill 2). And they need to do skill 2 objectively and clearly before they go on to identify new thinking that will point them away from crime and violence (skill 3). And they need to do skill 3 objectively and clearly before they actually practice their new thinking in real life (skill 4).

When a skill is skipped over or done poorly, the chain is broken and any “new thinking” a person might try to use is not anchored in their real experience of the world. It’s not personally meaningful. Without the anchor chain, it’s just words.

3) The Objectivity Principle:

Objectivity means we don’t make judgements about a person’s thinking or behavior. We don’t argue or debate whether a person’s thinking or behavior is justified or unjustified, distorted or undistorted, true or not true.

Objectivity is key to learning each of the skills of CSC:

- To report your thinking objectively means that you look at your thinking exactly as it occurred in your mind. This is skill 1.
- To recognizing how your thinking leads you to acts of crime and violence is not to judge that your thinking or your behavior is right or wrong. It is to identify the objective connection between your thinking and your behavior. This is skill 2.
- To find new thinking that steers you away from crime and violence is also objective. It doesn't presume right or wrong. But being able to think of new ways of thinking is an essential part of learning how to live without committing crime and violence, and to feel good about yourself when you do. This is skill 3.
- To practice new thinking in real life situations means you learn how to do it, not just talk about it. There is no judgement of right or wrong, but you do learn how to think and act as a non-violent and law-respecting person. This is skill 4.

The objectivity of Cognitive Self Change does not mean that the program or staff facilitators believe that violence and criminal behavior is OK or "morally neutral". We don't. It's because violence and crime are hurtful and wrong that we teach Cognitive Self Change in the first place.

- We practice objectivity because objectivity is essential to really seeing who you are and making clear decisions about who you are going to be.

Objectivity, Choice and Responsibility

- The program does not make moral judgements and does not tell you how to live your life. The program challenges you to make your own choices—consciously and deliberately. This means being responsible for what you do and who you are.
- Changing the thinking that leads you to crime and violence includes changing the way you think about yourself.
- When you learn how to steer your thinking away from crime and violence—and learn how 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.”

Cognitive Self Change Program Contract

Client: _____

Date: _____

I understand that all of the following conditions are necessary for the program to work and, as such, are conditions necessary for me to take part in the program. I also understand that CSC staff facilitators will work to assure that I succeed in the program, provided I meet these conditions.

1. Attendance. & punctuality

- I agree to attend all scheduled CSC groups.
- I agree to be on time for group.

2. Group Participation

- I agree to participate constructively in CSC groups under the direction of CSC staff facilitators.
- I understand that constructive participation includes making an honest effort to help other group members learn and practice the skills of CSC.

3. Journal Assignments

- I agree to complete all regular and special Journal Assignments when they are due and to make an honest effort to accomplish the goals of each Journal Assignment as explained by CSC staff facilitators.

4. Unconditional Respect

- I agree to respect other people while participating in CSC groups.
- I understand that unconditional respect means I will show respect to people whether or not I agree with them or approve of them and whether or not I perceive them as showing respect to me.

5. Open Channel of Communication

- I agree to keep an open channel of communication with CSC group facilitators and members.
- I understand that an open channel of communication means I will report my thoughts and feelings completely and objectively, without censorship or deliberate distortion, and without keeping secret any areas of my thinking or behavior that pose risk of criminal behavior.

Signed _____

(client)

(staff facilitator)

Cognitive Self Change Agreement on Confidentiality and Disclosure

1) Non-Confidentiality

Behaviors and thoughts disclosed by clients in the program will be shared with members of the client's CSC Supervision Team. The supervision team includes the facility Correctional Service Specialists, field Correctional Service Specialists, program facilitators and other correctional staff responsible for the client's supervision.

Information will not be routinely shared outside of the supervision team.

The sharing of information with persons or agencies outside of the Department of Corrections is regulated by the Department of Corrections policy on confidentiality. In general, information disclosed in the program will not be disclosed to persons outside of the Department of Corrections except as directed by a court order. Acts of child abuse are subject to special reporting requirements.

2) Non-Reporting of Past Crimes

Clients are not required to report identifying, physical details of past criminal actions for which they have not been convicted. The program is interested in patterns of thinking, not legal evidence of past crimes.

3) Responsibility for Convictions

Clients are required to accept responsibility for all crimes for which they have been convicted.

NOTE: Clients are entitled to participate in the program if and when their conviction is on appeal. If a conviction is the subject of a direct or collateral appeal, the client will be expected to accept responsibility for that crime until and unless there is a final order reversing or overturning the conviction. Disclosure of information within the program regarding a crime that is on appeal is regulated by Department of Corrections policy on confidentiality.

4) Requirement to Report Thinking

The primary requirement of participation in the program is a willingness to report one's thinking. It is especially important to report thinking that might pose a risk of leading to violence or criminal behavior.

Program clients are required to disclose and report their thinking during past and current situations, including situations in which they committed crimes or acts of violence in the past, and in which their current thinking puts them at a potential risk of committing a new crime or violent act.

5) Protection Against Punishment for Thoughts

Disclosure of thinking that puts a client at risk of criminal behavior is not automatically interpreted as a sign that the client is at risk to re-offend. On the contrary, reporting "high risk thinking" in the program is often an indication that the client is making a responsible effort to control or manage his or her risk to re-offend.

For this reason the Department will not restrict a client's freedom or increase his or her custody status based solely on the content of his or her thinking, with the following exception:

EXCEPTION: When a client's thinking indicates that the client poses a serious risk of danger to an identifiable victim, the Department will act to protect potential victims.

In order to assure coordination between the program and the Department and in order to protect the channel of communication between clients and the program, all decisions to increase a client's level of supervision or custody status due to information the client discloses during participation in the program will be reviewed by the client's Supervision Team (see above to identify who is on the Supervision Team).

- The client will have input in this review
- The review will consider a range of factors affecting the client's risk to re-offend, including a) the client's criminal history, b) new environmental circumstances, c) the client's behavior outside of the program, d) the quality of the client's participation in the program.
- The client's willingness to disclose his or her thinking will be considered as a positive indication of responsible program participation.

6) Non-Reporting of Acts Performed by Others

Clients are not required to report criminal acts or rule violations performed by others, including other members of the program.

7) Crimes and Violations Committed While in the Program

Clients will maintain good standing in the program as long as they openly report their thinking, meet the conditions of group participation and perform their individual program assignments. Clients will not be dropped from the program for new criminal behaviors or violations except when such behaviors or violations indicate a failure to report their thinking, to meet conditions of participation or to perform their individual program assignments.

8) Acceptance of the Conditions of Non-confidentiality and Disclosure:

I understand the conditions of disclosure and non-confidentiality described above.

Client Signature _____ Date _____

Staff Signature _____ Date _____

References on the Cognitive Self Change Program and its outcomes:

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

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

Bush, J., "Teaching Self Risk Management to Violent Offenders," in *What Works: Reducing Re-offending*, John Wiley & Sons, West Sussex and New York. 1995.

This book reviews principles and practices of correctional treatment that have proven to reduce recidivism. This chapter describes the Vermont Cognitive Self Change program.

Bush, J.; Harris, D.M.; & Parker, R.J. *Cognitive Self Change: How offenders experience the world and what we can do about it*. Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester. 2016

This book describes Cognitive Self Change, its underpinnings and how correctional rehabilitation can be improved.

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.

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

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

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

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

No matter who you are, no matter what your circumstances,
you can learn to steer your own life and give yourself a better
future
inside the law.

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our
thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the
world.

Dhammapada
The Sayings of the Buddha