Arthur Fleck’s Treatment using Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy

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Abstract: The character Arthur Fleck, from the movie Joker, exhibits symptoms that meet the criteria for pseudobulbar affect and psychopathic personality disorder. Both disorders can be treated using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). The article will discuss both forms of therapy in terms of possible treatment for Arthur, and specific techniques that can be used to improve his overall wellness.

Keywords: CBT; REBT; Pseudobulbar Affect; Psychopathic Personality.

Introduction

In the movie Joker, the main character, Arthur Fleck, presents issues of pseudobulbar affect and psychopathic personality disorder, which could be treated via two different theoretical orientations, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). A brief review of the film and a discussion on ways a counselor could treat Arthur by using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy allows for an academic comparison between these two therapeutic approaches.

Overview of Joker

The film Joker is set in the fictional Gotham City in 1981 and follows the main character, Arthur Fleck, through his psychopathic journey. At the outset of the film, Arthur works for a clown-for-hire company, but he faces bullying and isolation much of his life while also struggling with mental health. Arthur is also an unsuccessful comedian and performs at a local comedy club; an early scene shows Arthur laughing uncontrollably at himself. As an adult, Arthur lives in an apartment with his mother who suffers from depression. The two spend their time together fixated on a popular TV talk show hosted by Murry Franklin; Arthur often fantasizes about being invited on the show.

Early in the film, Arthur is fired from his job as a clown for bringing a gun to a children’s party. On the way home, Arthur again is consumed by uncontrollable laughter while on the subway, and three men begin mocking him and then assault him. Arthur pulls out his gun and shoots two of the men dead right away before chasing down and killing the third. Given his troubled background, the show of force elevates Arthur’s
sense of power. As news spreads about the murders, a wealthy elite speaks out about the crime and refers to lower class citizens as “clowns,” sparking rioters and looters to dress as such. The public reaction to the murder taps into deep-seated class antagonism in an unequal society in which many people feel dismissed by the establishment.

Arthur avoids being identified as the shooter, but his anonymity evaporates after the talk show host Murry Franklin plays a clip of his stand-up comedy performance as a way to mock him. A day later, Arthur receives a call from Murry inviting him on the show. All of this transpires as the audiences gains more insight into Arthur’s troubled past; Arthur discovers that he was adopted and the audience learns more of the abuse he faced at the hands of his adopted mother. In a fit a rage, Arthur smothers his mother to death.

Untroubled by yet another murder, Arthur prepares for his appearance on the Murray show by dying his hair green and wearing clown makeup. The police finally catch up to Arthur but fail to apprehend him as he escapes into the streets, which are crowded with rioting clowns. The powder keg of class antagonism has exploded, and the city of Gotham is overrun by rioter dressed as clowns.

Arthur arrives at the Murray show where he asks to be introduced as the Joker. While on air, Arthur admits to the subway murders. When Murray states he is calling the police, Arthur shoots him in the head on live television. Arthur is finally arrested but when the police transport him to jail, an ambulance driven by clowns crashes into the police car killing the cops and freeing Arthur. Arthur is found unconscious. When he awakes, he is surrounded by a mob of clowns cheering for him. He finally feels a sense of empowerment.

**Arthur’s Diagnosis**

This brief summary of the character Arthur’s trauma, past and present, can be a basis for a discussion of possible diagnosis and treatment. Based on Arthur’s symptoms of sudden onsets of crying or laughing, he would likely be diagnosed with pseudobulbar affect. The specific criterion for this disorder includes emotional episodes that are inappropriate, no relationship between the presented emotional state and what the individual is truly feeling at the time of the episode, the individual’s inability to control the episode or the duration of it, and the expression of the emotion providing no internal relief (Goldin 2020).

Pseudobulbar affect is considered a neurological disease, caused by a disconnection between the frontal lobes (front of the brain) and the cerebellum (back of the brain). The diagnosis of pseudobulbar affect would need to be made by a neurologist as it is a neurological disorder, and it is primarily treated with medication. The connection between the frontal lobes and cerebellum help express and coordinate emotions. When this connection is broken, the result is often a sudden onset of crying or laughing (Engelman et al. 2014), which we see in the case of Arthur Fleck. This neurological disorder can be a result of trauma, specifically a traumatic brain injury (Perotti et al., 2016). As stated in the summary, Arthur suffered from abuse and beatings as a child. Therefore, based on what viewers see, Arthur shows symptoms that could be diagnosed as pseudobulbar affect.
While Arthur meets the criteria for pseudobulbar affect, he also meets the criteria for psychopathic personality disorder, also known as PPD. While PPD is not listed in the current DSM 5th edition, there is some debate regarding the disorder itself. Some argue that PPD does not exist and that the disorder can be used synonymously with antisocial personality disorder. While the two disorders are synonymous for one another, the procedures for assessing and diagnosing the disorders greatly differ (Hart and Cook 2012). Typically, six domains of symptoms exist for PPD: attachment, behavioral, cognitive, dominance, emotion, and self-dominion.

1. Attachment. Symptoms include detachment, lack of empathy for others, and lack of commitment.
2. Behavioral. Symptoms include unreliability, recklessness, and aggression.
3. Cognitive. Symptoms include intolerance and inflexibility.
4. Dominance. Symptoms include deceitfulness, manipulativeness, and insincerity.
5. Emotional. Symptoms include lack of anxiety, lack of remorse, lack of emotional depth, and lack of emotional stability.

In the case, Arthur Fleck has experienced isolation, loneliness, and trauma throughout his life. He has very limited external support, leading to neglect and abuse even as an adult. However, Arthur shows very little empathy for the people he murdered and uses extreme aggression and recklessness toward people such as Murry, his former co-worker, and the three men he murdered on the subway. Arthur feels no remorse for his actions, and lacks emotional stability based on his behaviors. Arthur reaches a point in the movie where he wants to be noticed, as he has lacked attention his whole life. He does this by dying his hair green and wearing clown makeup. Arthur is of a sound mind and experiences no delusions or hallucinations. He knows what he is doing and does so to enhance his power. Criteria for PPD, listed in the DSM includes antagonism and disinhibition. Antagonism can be characterized by manipulativeness, deceitfulness, callousness, and hostility. Disinhibition can be characterized by irresponsibility, impulsivity, and risk taking (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 2000). Based on his presenting symptoms, Arthur does meet the criteria for psychopathic personality disorder.

**Theoretical Approach:**
**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**

Based on the criteria discussed, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a theoretical approach that could be used to treat Arthur, assuming that he would seek such treatment. CBT is founded on the belief that even maladaptive responses can change, and this can be accomplished by individuals learning to modify their cognitive processes (Neukrug 2010). One therapeutic technique within CBT specifically examines behavior. Behavioral techniques can help individual’s change
their automatic thoughts, negative feelings, and dysfunctional behaviors by examining the emotions and behaviors that have resulted (Neukrug 2010).

Although pseudobulbar affect is treated with medication, one study found CBT to be effective at symptom reduction for individuals with pseudobulbar affect (Perotti et al. 2016). To address Arthur’s symptoms resulting from pseudobulbar affect, a therapist could employ a self-control technique. Self-control refers to a response made to control or change a behavior (Perotti et al. 2016). One study reported symptom reduction when a counselor gave self-control instructions to a client (Perotti et al. 2016). Working with Arthur to practice deep breathing in a therapeutic environment, could provide him a tool to use when his symptoms begin to manifest. As a result, he could possess self-control over his presenting behavior.

It would be important for the counselor to teach him to inhale through his nose to the point where his lungs inflate, pause, then exhale through his mouth. This sequence would be practiced and repeated, with the counselor prompting him in the therapeutic session, until he no longer needed such instruction or prompting (Perotti et al. 2016). As a result, if Arthur found himself in another instance where he was uncontrollably laughing, using this breathing method would help mitigate his symptoms and allow him to return to a more controlled state.

As discussed, CBT is an effective approach to treat pseudobulbar affect. In terms of treating psychopathic personality disorder, CBT would also be an effective approach to use. Specifically, CBT is more effective at treating psychopathic personality disorder than other forms of treatment because it can be used to focus on impulsivity and cognitive processing to reduce symptoms (Hecht 2018).

When utilizing CBT, building a therapeutic alliance is an essential technique employed at the beginning of therapy (Neukrug 2010). This can often be hard when working with individuals suffering from PPD, like the fictional character Arthur. Individuals diagnosed with psychopathic personality disorder will often have trouble with relationships (Hart and Cook 2012). In the case of Arthur, it would be important for him to view the counselor-client relationship as a team, recognizing that the counselor would guide him toward more effective ways of thinking and acting (Neukrug 2010). The counselor would demonstrate empathy, caring, and optimism throughout therapy to build and strengthen the therapeutic alliance (Neukrug 2010). Arthur has suffered from neglect, isolation, and persecution much of his life. Having a therapist who demonstrates empathy, support, and care is likely to create a positive atmosphere in which he would feel comfortable sharing and working to improve his cognitive processing and behaviors.

Identifying and challenging automatic thoughts and images is another therapeutic technique within CBT that can be used once a therapeutic alliance has been built (Neukrug 2010). Through this technique, the therapist would help Arthur see how his core beliefs affect who he is, or identify his automatic thoughts and images (Neukrug, 2010). For example, Arthur may believe he is a horrible person. The counselor would work to gently challenge his cognitive distortion about himself resulting in more rational ways of thinking.

Rational-Emotional Role-Play is a technique used within CBT that allows clients to have a role...
play or debate between the rational and emotional parts of themselves (Neukrug 2010). This technique would be appropriate to use after identifying and challenging automatic thoughts and images. If a therapist were to employ this technique with Arthur, the therapist would start by role playing the rational part of Arthur’s thoughts, and Arthur would respond with the dysfunctional or emotional part. To counteract the dysfunctional part, the therapist would assume the dysfunctional role. The role play following the first part of this process may look something like this:

Arthur: I am a horrible person; I am always thinking about killing people.

Counselor: I am not! Most of the time, I follow society’s rules and am a good son.

Arthur: Well, I may not always think about killing people, but when I do, I know I am a bad person.

Counselor: I know that these thoughts are not good, but I know it is only a small part of who I am as a person.

Through this process, the therapist will highlight the cognitive distortions in Arthur’s thinking and help him develop ways to become more rational in his thinking (Newkrug 2010).

A specific CBT-based approach known as the “ABC Program” (A: activating event, B: belief, C: consequence) is a six-to-eight-month program emphasizing social learning principles, antisocial attitudes, anger problems, and relationship skills (Hecht 2018). The goal of this program is to increase prosocial skills and reduce violent behaviors that often accompany the diagnosis of psychopathic personality disorder (Hecht 2018). Arthur may benefit from a similar program as he exhibits symptoms of antisocial attitudes, increased anger, trouble with relationships, and violent behaviors. Results from the ABC Program indicate a reduction in violent behaviors and supports CBT as an effective evidence-based approach to treating individuals with PPD (Hecht 2018).

Theoretical Approach:

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy

While CBT is one possible treatment option for the fictional character Arthur Fleck, it is not the only possible route. Another option would be to use rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT). Albert Ellis created REBT and used it to treat individuals with PPD. This therapeutic approach contends human beings are fallible and have the potential for rational or irrational thinking (Neukrug 2010). Throughout therapy, the counselor would work with Arthur to determine more effective ways of living and help him learn about his psychological self (Neukrug 2010).

Unconditional acceptance is an essential part of rational emotive behavior therapy. The therapist demonstrates acceptance during the counseling session while recognizing that sometimes people exhibit behaviors that are unhealthy to themselves and others (Neukrug 2010). It is important for the counselor to recognize that Arthur may exhibit some unhealthy behaviors, and to normalize any feelings Arthur may have regarding his uncontrollable laughter. Arthur has suffered from isolation, neglect, and loneliness his entire life and working with a therapist who demonstrates unconditional acceptance would allow him to have
a space where he can feel cared for, supported, and accepted. As a result, Arthur would be able to freely discuss his thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Therapists who practice REBT typically challenge clients. This would occur by the counselor suggesting to Arthur that he examine his current way of functioning in terms of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Neukrug 2010). If Arthur then believes change would be effective, he would work with the counselor to adopt more rational beliefs and feelings along with healthier behaviors. Behaviors associated with pseudobulbar affect include uncontrollable laughing or crying. While this behavior is typically linked to a broken connection between the front and back of the brain, the therapist can still work with Arthur to process those behaviors along with the feelings and emotions associated (Engelman et al. 2014).

A therapeutic technique within rational emotive behavior therapy includes behavioral and cognitive disputations. Within this technique, Arthur and the counselor would practice behavioral changes, and begin to replace them with healthy ones (Neukrug 2010). Additionally, Arthur may feel a sense of embarrassment by his sudden outbursts. He and the counselor would work to dispute these beliefs and replace them with healthier, more rational ones (Neukrug 2010). The goal, when working with Arthur, would be to look at his current thoughts and behaviors and replace them with healthier ways of living in the world, ultimately improving his overall wellness.

REBT can also be used to treat individuals with PPD. As stated, a common symptom of individuals with PPD is trouble with relationships (Hart et al. 2012). Therefore, it would be important for the therapist to align themselves with Arthur (Ellis 1961). Building rapport is an important aspect of rational emotive behavior therapy and is particularly important when working with individuals diagnosed with PPD (Ellis 1961). Once the therapist has established rapport with Arthur, he is likely to feel a connection and be more willing to talk. The therapist could then discuss his self-defeating behaviors, with the intention that Arthur begins to realize that he is self-sabotaging (Ellis 1961).

Individuals suffering from PPD often believe that their behaviors help them. When approached calmly, and without blame, individuals like Arthur can change their beliefs and behaviors (Ellis 1961). In terms of treatment, improving Arthur’s living patterns and reducing his antisocial behaviors are key to symptom reduction (Ellis 1961). Through this therapeutic approach, the counselor would encourage Arthur to learn a new philosophical orientation and leave behind his past one that causes harm (Ellis 1961).

Through cognitive disputation, the counselor would highlight Arthur’s unrealistic philosophies and self-sabotaging behaviors (Ellis 1961). For instance, Arthur looks at people as pawns in his life. The counselor would challenge this belief and ask questions that would draw out the reasons behind Arthur’s thought process (Neukrug 2010). If Arthur argues that he has no control over these beliefs, the therapist will highlight how feelings are controllable (Ellis 1961).

Role playing or psychodrama is a technique that can also be used with Arthur. Through a role play, Arthur could expose his feelings and attitudes to the therapist (Hecht, 2018). This technique provides the possibility for Arthur to alter his emotions and cognitions and develop empathy (Hecht, 2018). During this process the
counselor would have the opportunity to employ many therapeutic techniques such as challenging the client, demonstrating the ABC’s of feeling and behaving, and disputing cognitions, behaviors, and emotions. Using the ABC’s of feeling and behaving, the counselor would show Arthur how his own beliefs cause him emotional distress (Neukrug 2010). The counselor would be able to highlight the activating event (A), irrational belief (B) and the consequence (C) (Neukrug 2010).

The therapeutic techniques within rational emotive behavior therapy would work to disprove Arthur’s irrational and illogical beliefs and provide him with healthier ways of thinking and behaving (Neukrug 2010). As a result, Arthur’s self-sabotaging behaviors would be reduced and more effective ways of behaving and thinking would be encouraged.

CBT and REBT

CBT and REBT have many similarities as they are both considered Cognitive-Behavioral Approaches. The main similarity lies within their core beliefs; both approaches posit that people can change and can develop more effective and healthy ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Neukrug 2010). When treating Arthur, working with him to improve his cognitions and behaviors are essential in helping him live a healthier life and cope with stress.

As with almost all forms of therapy, building a therapeutic alliance is essential (Neukrug 2010). Since Arthur has had limited external support as characterized in the film, it is important for the counselor to build a rapport and relationship with him. Providing a positive space for Arthur would allow for an opportunity for change and growth.

CBT and REBT also both utilize role playing as a therapeutic technique (Neukrug 2010). This allows Arthur to be active and engaged during treatment, hopefully break through his defenses, and alter his cognitions and behaviors (Hecht 2018). The therapeutic techniques mentioned, all have the same purpose of helping Arthur improve his cognitions, feelings, and behaviors.

Despite CBT and REBT having some similarities, differences do exist between the two approaches. REBT seeks to replace irrational beliefs with rational ones as a way of improving cognitions, whereas CBT looks at maladaptive emotional responses and ways those responses can be changed through the therapeutic process (Neukrug, 2010).

One technique that CBT utilizes is thought stopping. When one has a negative thought, they are instructed to yell “stop it” to interrupt the thought (Neukrug, 2010). While this technique was not mentioned prior, it would have benefits for treating Arthur’s PPD. After the negative thought was interrupted, it would be replaced with a positive one (Neukrug 2010). For example, if Arthur thought about hurting someone, he would yell “stop it,” and replace that thought with something else, like his favorite place. In contrast, REBT does not try to interrupt the irrational belief, rather it works to replace the irrational belief with a rational one once it has been identified (Neukrug 2010). Utilizing thought stopping may be an effective strategy in interrupting the irrational belief when it begins to manifest in one’s cognitions.

CBT and REBT would both be beneficial to Arthur, as they look to change existing cognitions, emotions, and behaviors and replace them with more effective ones. Additionally, CBT offers self-control
techniques, which would help Arthur cope and manage his uncontrollable laughter, a symptom of pseudobulbar affect. The goal of both forms of therapy encourages the client to change their existing way, in a supportive, encouraging environment.

One could diagnose the main character of the movie, Joker, Arthur Fleck, with pseudobulbar affect based on his presenting symptom of uncontrollable laughing. Arthur exhibits a lack of empathy, recklessness, manipulativeness, and self-aggrandizement, to name a few other key symptoms of the disorder. This is highlighted by his killing spree and lack of remorse. Therefore, he meets the criteria for psychopathic personality disorder. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) are two approaches a therapist could use to treat Arthur. CBT would work to provide Arthur with effective ways to cope, such deep breathing exercises. CBT would also look to change his current ways of functioning into healthier thoughts and behaviors. This could be done through role playing. REBT would help Arthur identify his irrational beliefs and replace them with rational ones. The counselor may challenge his current beliefs in a role play. Ultimately, both approaches work to build a therapeutic relationship between the counselor and client. If Arthur could be convinced that he could benefit from treatment, the hope would be that he would see symptom reduction and improved wellness using these treatment approaches.

Note on Author: Gwenyth Duclos is pursuing her Master of Education in Counseling. Her research was completed in fall 2022 under the mentorship of Dr. Kate Bender. She plans to start her practicum at a mental health agency in the summer of 2023 and hopes to work with adults and adolescents.

References