

# The ABC Triangle and the need for empathy

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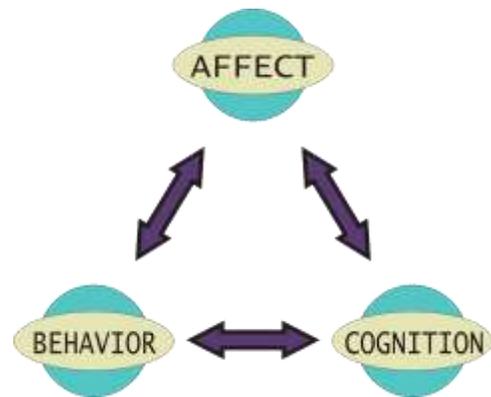
Workplace counselors often work with clients within an ABC triangle, exploring the 'Affective' (how we feel), the 'Behavioral' (how we behave) and the 'Cognitive' (how we think). You don't have to be a therapist to be able to spot the signs of stress or anxiety in colleagues.

The first skill we need to acknowledge is Empathy. It's not rocket science. The Collins dictionary defines this as 'the power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings'. We're often more aware than we think about how we can and do empathize with others.

## The (A)ffective Domain

Starting with A, the 'Affective' domain, how we feel. The easiest entry point to this is to reflect on emotions. We all have them. Some access them more than others do. Emotional Intelligence (EI), a concept developed by Daniel Goleman in the mid-1990s proposed that EI could matter more than Cognitive Intelligence or IQ. Being intelligent about one's emotions taps strongly into empathy.

Workplace counselors often see clients who say they are feeling 'stressed', but 'stress' as a word really doesn't mean much on its own. What are you stressed about, how is it manifested, why are you feeling this now, when does it occur? Answers start to build up a picture, a sort of cause and effect.



Anger is often regarded as one of the most 'powerful' emotions and behind it can lie a multitude of triggers. Is the anger about frustration, feeling ignored, being trapped? Peel back the layers further and 'frustration' might reveal a tension about wanting to deliver but feeling constrained by someone or something. In this example, the 'wanting to deliver' reveals a powerful positive thrust.

This should be nurtured, however the 'constraining' part is the limitation, the restrictor. By empathizing with the nature of this constraint it might be possible to understand why it exists and in so doing appreciate its existence, so a different reference point can be achieved.

## The (B)ehavioral Domain

B stands for 'Behavior', how we behave. We all have different ways to cope with or manage tensions and pressures, some are more positive than others are. Substance misuse can be a common unproductive coping mechanism, using an addictive crux to take us out of one situation into a temporary utopia, but it's not addressing what might be an underlying problem.

Bullying is a behavior and when it's rife it can become an organizational cancer. Causes are complex. Anti-bullying and harassment policies are a pre-requisite but it's knowing how and why it happens that's equally important. People bully because it serves them to do so, they get some benefit from it, whether it's some superiority or authority fix or it gives them some greater sense of self. It is at great cost to others.

## The (C)ognitive Domain

C looks at 'Cognitions', how we think. Much of work is about making decisions, thinking about different courses of actions to achieve a desired result. Sometimes we can find it difficult to think, we get distracted, can't concentrate, feel we're all over the place. Sometimes we have negative thoughts, frequent mood changes or disrupted sleep patterns. This can all indicate stress. This reveals an important recognition in identifying stress and anxiety in others. If someone is behaving differently, then there is often a reason for this. Is this revealing ineffective coping mechanisms to a pressured situation, i.e. stress?

If we take anxiety as a manifestation of stress, then it's important to recognize the physical responses. This might include palpitations, a faster heart rate and increased blood pressure or 'butterflies' in our stomach and bowel problems or perhaps more visibly, increased sweating, reddening and blushing plus muscle tension and fatigue.

At the end of the day, to spot signs of stress in others really requires us to be able to recognize them in ourselves too. When we do spot signs of stress in others, it's important to remember there is a solution. Workplace counselors are skilled at helping you identify stress triggers and exploring solutions to reduce these causes or helping you become more resilient with increased coping skills. These specialists can be found within many employee assistance programs (EAPs) or identified locally through [PsychologyToday.com](http://PsychologyToday.com)