

# Basic Cognitive Processing Guidelines

(rev. 12/02/24)

Overview:

This form is designed to guide a structured approach to cognitive processing of problem-behaviors that resulted in a resident using the Support Center.

Goal One: Help the resident talk about an incident without re-experiencing the strong overwhelming feelings that likely drove the problem-behaviors.

In general, Cognitive Processing is intended to help kids become more thoughtful human beings. Strong emotions get in the way of the thinking parts of the brain effectively operating. Thus, feelings such as guilt and shame are counter-productive.

*People Are Not Their Behaviors.* A core of Cognitive Processing is to help residents think about their behaviors (and their feelings and thoughts) as only a part of who they are. That part of themselves can be objectively examined, without judging their value and worth as a human being.

An important skill that consistent Cognitive Processing is intended to develop is the resident's ability to talk about having been upset, without fully re-experiencing those, or other, overwhelmingly strong feelings. The idea is to be able to mentally step back from having been upset and be able to use the analytical parts of the brain to understand what happened.

Goal Two: Help the resident take responsibility for their own actions?

There are different levels of taking responsibility. However, the most basic is simply owning up to the fact that you did perform the behaviors that resulted in having to leave the Residential Unit and go to the Support Center. If residents don't own their own behaviors, then they have no power to change those behaviors. At this early point in Basic Cognitive Processing, staff are not yet interested in hearing reasons why the resident chose various behaviors, instead simply getting them to admit to using those behaviors.

Goal Three: Help the resident understand how their own feelings and thoughts (rather than other people's actions or some external situation) is what drove their behaviors. Also, help the resident talk about feelings and thoughts without re-experiencing those strong feelings.

In more advanced forms of Cognitive Processing there is a structured approach to achieving this goal, called Chaining. However, in Basic Cognitive Processing it's sufficient to simply see if the resident has insight into their own feelings and thoughts. The basic belief that is intended to be instilled is that: *All Behaviors Happen for a Reason*. In other words, behaviors don't just happen for no reason. They are always the result of a preceding feeling or thought.

Goal Four: Help the resident accept that their behaviors impact the people around them. This is a basic step in teaching accountability.

Often, residents will avoid thinking about how they have negatively impacted peers and staff. Again, the idea is to be able to think about that, without experiencing overwhelming feelings of guilt or shame that interfere with the functioning of the thinking parts of their brain. The staff person should not simply accept the resident's answers to this question, but instead ask clarifying questions or give opinions designed to help the resident be more accurate and objective in how they impact those around them.

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Goal Five: Help the resident plan ahead for how they could better handle a similar situation in the future.

Being able to plan ahead is a key executive skill for kids becoming better able to regulate their own behaviors. This skill is developed by practicing it.

## General Approach:

Effective Cognitive Processing needs to be customized for each resident. A developmentally younger resident will tend to benefit from simplified expectations, while older teens can sometimes be very sophisticated in how they process. The Behavior Management Counselor has to use their judgement for determining how thorough to be in the use of Cognitive Processing.

Cognitive Processing is not the only kind of Processing, although it should be an expectation that most residents who are at the Support Center for significant behavior problems will participate in Cognitive Processing before returning to a residential unit.