

Chapter 3. The CSPP CBT Anger-Management Project

From Class Assignment to Life Protocol

In my second year at the California School of Professional Psychology (CSPP), I took an elective course with attorney–psychologist Dr. Leslie Rosen: “Cognitive-Behavioral Approaches to Interventions.” Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) focuses on how thoughts, emotions, and behaviors interact. It helps people:

- Notice distorted, automatic thoughts
- Track patterns through self-observation and recording
- Run behavioral experiments and gradual exposure
- Learn concrete skills such as emotion regulation and problem-solving
- to work through psychological difficulties.

Besides teaching CBT, Dr. Rosen gave us a major assignment:

Pick one behavior of your own you genuinely want to change.

Analyze it carefully, apply CBT methods exactly as taught in class, track the change, and present the results at the end of the semester.

This was the first truly systematic behavior-change project of my life. Hillary Clinton once lamented in *It Takes a Village* that our education system rarely teaches how to change one’s own behavior. This course, for me, filled part of that gap.

In this chapter, I’ll describe how I designed and carried out that project, and what clinical lessons emerged—lessons that later became a foundation for CNCBT and AARV(4).

Theoretical Foundation: Cognitive Triangle and Physiological Response

As an undergraduate at UCLA, I was used to sitting passively in large lecture halls. CSPP was different: small, discussion-based classes and heavy emphasis on clinical practice. By my

second year, the workload had intensified—15-to-20-person seminars, case discussions, large reading and writing loads, and close supervisory relationships.

While immersed in academics and internship work, I neglected my own emotional health. At home, my irritability toward my wife increased. I reacted sharply even to small requests or everyday conversations, which led to tension and conflict. Raised voices, stony silence, and escalating standoffs became common.

I knew something needed to change, but I did not yet know how.

For the class project, while my classmates chose many different targets, I chose my anger toward my wife. My anger showed up in two main forms:

1. Explosive outbursts – raising my voice when emotions ran high
2. Passive-aggressive behavior – coldness, silence, sulking, or shutting down

These flared especially when I was stressed from school and my wife approached me with a request or comment.

My goal was clear:

Use CBT to become aware of and regulate these reactions, and reduce or eliminate anger episodes at home.

If the project worked as CBT theory predicted, it would be more than a class assignment; it could make our home more peaceful. Later, this project became the prototype that I redesigned into CNCBT AARV(4) training, integrated with 21-story stair climbing.

“It Depends on How You Interpret It”

CBT often centers on the idea that “it’s all in how you interpret it.” This is the cognitive triangle: thought–emotion–behavior.

Our emotions and actions are influenced less by events themselves than by how we interpret those events.

If, while I was working on a paper, my wife spoke to me about something at home and I interpreted it as:

“She’s interrupting me again,”

I would feel irritation and respond with an elevated tone or cold silence.

If instead I interpreted it as:

“Maybe something urgent came up,”

my reaction would likely be different.

I also tracked physical responses—racing heart, shallow breathing, blurred vision, facial tension—as a fourth component in my model.

This laid the groundwork for what later became CNCBT (cardio–neuro–cognitive–behavioral technique): emotion regulation seen as an integrated brain–body–behavior process.

Intervention Design: Five CBT Coping Skills

For this project, I used five CBT-based coping skills to turn **undesirable emotional behavior (UEB)** into **desirable emotional behavior (DEB)**:

Trigger Awareness

Identify in advance the cues that tend to spark emotional reactions.

Emotion Acceptance

Accept the discomfort that arises when anger escalates, instead of fighting it.

Relaxation Breathing

Use HRV-style slow, deep breathing to reduce physiological arousal.

Active Listening

Listen carefully to my partner and respond sincerely.

Validation and Empathy

Acknowledge and validate my partner’s feelings.

Setting a Baseline: Five-Level Emotional Control and Regulation Scale (5-ECRS)

To measure change, I needed a baseline—an Emotional Control and Regulation Scale (5-ECRS) with five levels. This kind of rating is widely used in CBT work with panic, depression, PTSD, and anger.

Five-Level Emotional Control and Regulation Scale (5-ECRS)

Level 5 – Excellent Control

Emotions are regulated effectively; all five CBT coping strategies used; interaction remains respectful.

Level 4 – Good Control

Mild emotional discomfort; 3–4 strategies used; overall well controlled.

Level 3 – Partial Control

Mild anger or distress; 2–3 strategies attempted.

Level 2 – Poor Control

Hurtful comments or tone; only 1–2 strategies used, and only partially.

Level 1 – Loss of Control

Emotional explosion, harsh words, or prolonged silence; serious loss of control.

I kept a weekly checklist and recorded the frequency and intensity of DEB and UEB. During the first two weeks of monitoring (before major intervention), I noticed:

- Most reactions were at Level 3 (partial control).
- Evenings and weekends were especially vulnerable times.
- Simply monitoring and recording behavior led to some improvement—a classic reactivity effect.

Results over those two weeks:

- Level 5: 0
- Level 4: 1
- Level 3: 9
- Level 2: 4
- Level 1: 0

Results: “Best Project” in CSPP’s CBT Class

By the end of the semester, emotional conflicts had decreased by about 75%, and my academic focus had improved.

When I presented the project in class, Dr. Rosen and my classmates responded with applause and exclamations of “Wow!” Dr. Rosen raised both thumbs and, *informally*, named it the best project in that year’s CBT interventions course.

Classmates said things like:

“Clinically very practical and highly applicable.”

“You structured the CBT techniques precisely.”

The project closely mirrored CBT treatment strategies used in real therapy, which is why it was so well received. For me, it was living proof that structured CBT could dramatically reduce anger episodes at home.

Desirable Difficulties and Quizzes: The Engine of Learning

The core of behavior change was learning design. To systematically acquire DEB, I drew on Robert Bjork’s concept of “desirable difficulties.”

The idea:

When we intentionally add challenges to learning—such as retrieval demands, varied contexts, and spaced practice—we strengthen long-term memory and flexible thinking.

Bjork repeatedly emphasized in his lectures that self-testing and quizzes—involving active encoding, rehearsal, and retrieval—greatly enhance learning.

So I built quiz-style self-tests into my practice. These quizzes:

- Were based on real-life situations
- Focused on interactions with my partner that had triggered emotional explosions in the past
- Gave me opportunities to rehearse DEB instead of my usual reactions

Example Quiz Scenario from the CSPP Project

At dinner, my wife brings up my mother's visit, planned for three months from now. She wants to plan the schedule and adjust her work shifts. I say,

"Let's talk in the study after dinner."

In the past, conversations about my mother's visits have stirred up strong feelings. I often assumed my wife didn't welcome my mother, became defensive, and the discussion escalated into an argument.

Question: As part of my effort to strengthen positive coping and develop DEB skills, how should I respond when my wife comes into the study to talk about my mother's visit?

a.

Recognize the emotional trigger and accept it without judgment. Use deep breathing. Turn my body or gaze slightly toward my wife and say, "I'm listening," but continue typing my "urgent draft." Nod occasionally or say "Mm-hmm" while I keep working.

b.

Recognize and accept the trigger, and label my emotions in words. Begin slow, deep breathing. Stop typing, turn my body fully toward my wife, and make eye contact. Listen attentively and actively, occasionally paraphrasing her words. Ask about her concerns and whether there are additional issues that need discussion.

c.

Recognize the trigger and pause my typing to give her full attention. Listen to her concerns, acknowledge them, suggest a joint solution, and check whether there are further worries to address.

d.

Recognize and label my emotional trigger, then begin deep relaxation breathing. Stop working and say, "I'm listening." Communicate calmly and listen, nodding to show understanding.

Commentary

All four responses are better than an emotional explosion or passive-aggressive withdrawal. But (b) is the best choice, because it integrates all five key coping strategies:

- Trigger awareness
- Emotion acceptance
- Relaxation breathing
- Active listening
- Validation and empathy

The other options omit one or more of these essential elements. Then, why bother writing four choices instead of just drilling the “best” answer? Because:

- Familiar format
- Using a standard multiple-choice format felt familiar and engaged me in carefully comparing options.
- Intentional difficulty: slight variations between answers raised the difficulty. I had to analyze each option, which deepened my understanding of the techniques.
- Pause–Reflect–Choose
- Multiple choices forced me to pause, reflect, and then choose—mirroring the pause needed in real-life conflicts.
- Learning tool, not just a test

The quizzes became a core learning medium, not merely an evaluation tool. I deliberately made learning more challenging—and therefore more rewarding.

CSPP Project vs. CNCBT AARV(4): Similarities and Differences

Similarities

Both:

- Explicitly spell out the sequence: trigger awareness → acceptance → relaxation → listening → reflection → normalization → problem-solving
- Use repeated exposure and feedback to shift UEB → DEB
- Use self-monitoring, baselines, and checklists

Differences

CSPP Project

- Mostly cognitive rehearsal at a desk or in conversations, using quiz-based encoding–rehearsal–retrieval

CNCBT AARV(4)

- Conducted during high-intensity aerobic exercise (e.g., 21-SCE)
- Uses encoding–embodying–retrieval
- Embodying ties together movement, posture, gaze, and breathing, turning concepts into bodily patterns

In Bjork’s terms, exercise adds noise, fatigue, and breath control—raising difficulty, but in a desirable way. This multi-context retrieval strengthens transfer to real-life situations.

In short:

- The CSPP project was primarily cognitive rehearsal.
- AARV(4) training is full-body rehearsal.

Quizzes vs. AARV(4) Scripts: Which Is Better?

They do different things:

Quizzes

- Sharpen accuracy and discrimination
- Expose knowledge gaps, allow quick correction

AARV(4) scripts

- Are 45–60 seconds of audio guidance paired with 30–45 seconds of silent retrieval
- Combine auditory input with visual and motor retrieval while moving
- Rehearse tone, speed, and muscle tension—so they transfer more readily into live situations

Best is both together: use quizzes for precision, scripts for real-life transfer.

Relationship Changes: Calm and Closeness

As DEB increased, my wife’s defensiveness decreased. Our conversations shifted from pressure, withdrawal, and explosions to mutual respect and negotiation.

Attempts to control her through anger, sarcasm, silence, or aggressive gestures had never produced real change—only fear.

A key insight emerged. The only thing I can truly control is my own reaction. That sense of responsibility became the emotional safety net of our relationship.

Relapse and Redesign: The “Blueberry Incident”

What I call the “Blueberry Incident” showed me that even well-learned DEB can erode under stress and environmental change.

By mid-2018, I noticed myself becoming more irritable and less patient, much like in my CSPP days. Negative patterns began to reappear.

This coincided with several stressors:

- Uncertainty about renewal of my employment contract
- SOCKOR’s relocation from Yongsan (Camp Kim) to Pyeongtaek (Camp Humphreys)
- Closing and moving my office
- Ending an apartment lease and moving our home to Pyeongtaek area

After we moved, my wife often called at lunchtime asking me to buy groceries at the commissary. On the day of the incident, she told me on the phone what to buy and then texted the list.

After work, without checking the text, I relied on memory and bought various items—including four bags of frozen blueberries, which I like.

At home, she asked why I hadn’t bought frozen corn, which she had clearly mentioned and texted. She pointed out that I “always” failed to check her texts and asked why I hadn’t checked whether we already had frozen blueberries. There were already two unopened bags in the freezer.

I felt stung that she focused on what I hadn’t bought instead of what I had. The phrase “you always” hit my old trigger.

I reacted harshly—threw the blueberry bags into the freezer, went into my study, slammed the door, and refused to talk to her.

The fallout lasted six days.

The discomfort of that week showed me that my emotion-regulation and behavior-change strategies needed to be revisited and redesigned.

Seeing It from My Wife's Perspective

You might wonder:

“Why doesn't the partner also change?”

“Why argue over something so small?”

But the core truth is this:

Relationships are mutual, but the only behavior I can directly change is my own.

In the past, I tried to control my wife's behavior through outbursts, cold silence, rigid facial expressions, or dramatic gestures. None of these produced healthy change.

Instead, I saw fear in her eyes. That fear was a clear signal that my strategy was failing.

One day she told me:

“It's actually easier for me to express my feelings honestly than to suppress them. Suppressing them makes me more uncomfortable.”

Her honesty showed me that the responsibility for change lay with me.

Understanding and Accepting Responsibility

My wife's reactions reflected her way of navigating the emotional landscape of our relationship.

My task was to create an environment where she could express herself without fear. This was not about correcting her; it was about my own growth and self-exploration.

In a healthy, sustainable relationship, each person has a responsibility to be aware of and regulate their own emotions.

My journey has been a continuous training in:

- Noticing my reactions

- Understanding why they arise
- Choosing better ways to respond

These shifts became the groundwork for interactions built on empathy and understanding, not fear.