Ten Quotes That Sum Up CBT Perfectly

I do like a witty bon mot or a word of wisdom here and there, especially when I think they’ll make a therapeutic point. The following quotes epitomise (sometimes literally) the philosophy and practice of cognitive behaviour therapy . . .

“Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them”

Albert Ellis, the founding father of the first form of CBT, Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), turned to the Stoic Philosophers when developing it. This quote forms the foundations of REBT and comes courtesy of the Ancient Greek philosopher, Epictetus.

“For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so”

You can thank Shakespeare for this one (Hamlet: Act II, Scene II, if you must know). No matter how good (or bad) things are, you can always make them better or worse by what you tell yourself. Basically, it’s all about perspective.

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent”

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt: politician, diplomat, activist, First Lady of the United States, better half of the 32nd President of America (Franklin D. Roosevelt) and very wise person indeed. People will say what they will about you. Only you decide whether their comment hits home or not.

“What you think of yourself is much more important than what others think of you”

Back to the Stoics with this one: Lucius Annaeus Seneca, statesmen, dramatist and advisor to the Emperor Nero. You have every right to be you: crazy, wonderful you. Celebrate yourself – warts and all!

“No! Try not! Do, or do not. There is no try”

That aged Jedi Master Yoda, a therapist he was. This original trilogy quote (The Empire Strikes Back) applies to everything, including homework (which is an essential part of CBT) and parties. Seriously: you’re throwing a shindig on Friday, you call your bestie to check they’re coming and they say they’ll “try to make it.” Would you expect them or not?

“The problem is not the problem. The problem is your attitude about the problem”

Oh, Captain Jack Sparrow, you pirate, plunderer and accidental psychotherapist you. My, but how you hit the nail on the head with this one. Your problems will change when you change the way you look at them.

“I never look back, darling. It distracts from the now”

Edna Mode, the superhero fashion designer and all-round auteur kept herself calm with this one. When you focus too much on the past (which can’t be changed) or too much on the future (which hasn’t happened yet), you forget to enjoy the here and now. CBT and mindfulness both teach you to focus on the now and to become happier in the process.

“All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make, the better”

This one belongs to the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Every time you do something, you learn something, and that includes your mistakes. Don’t be afraid to make them and don’t let your mistakes define you.

“Watch your thoughts, they become your words; watch your words, they become your actions; watch your actions, they become your habits; watch your habits, they become your character; watch your character, for it becomes your destiny”

Over the years, this has been ascribed to Buddha, the Ancient Chinese poet and philosopher Lao Tzu, Ralph Waldo Emerson and, even, Margaret Thatcher’s dad! Whomsoever said it first; it describes beautifully just where a thought can lead; which leads me to my last quote, which kind of echoes the first.

“The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts”

I started with the Stoics and I shall finish with the Stoics. This time it’s the turn of former Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, who did his best to choose the good ones.