

What Is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)?

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Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a type of psychotherapeutic treatment that helps people learn how to identify and change the destructive or disturbing thought patterns that have a negative influence on their behavior and emotions.

Cognitive behavioral therapy combines cognitive therapy with behavior therapy by identifying maladaptive patterns of thinking, emotional responses, or behaviors and replacing them with more desirable patterns.

Cognitive behavioral therapy focuses on changing the automatic negative thoughts that can contribute to and worsen our emotional difficulties, depression, and anxiety. These spontaneous negative thoughts also have a detrimental influence on our mood.

Through CBT, faulty thoughts are identified, challenged, and replaced with more objective, realistic thoughts.

This video has been medically reviewed by Steven Gans, MD.

Types of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

CBT encompasses a range of techniques and approaches that address our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. These can range from structured psychotherapies to self-help practices. Some of the specific types of therapeutic approaches that involve cognitive behavioral therapy include:

- **Cognitive therapy** centers on identifying and changing inaccurate or distorted thought patterns, emotional responses, and behaviors.

- **Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT)** addresses destructive or disturbing thoughts and behaviors while incorporating treatment strategies such as emotional regulation and mindfulness.
- **Multimodal therapy** suggests that psychological issues must be treated by addressing seven different but interconnected modalities: behavior, affect, sensation, imagery, cognition, interpersonal factors, and drug/biological considerations.
- **Rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT)** involves identifying irrational beliefs, actively challenging these beliefs, and finally learning to recognize and change these thought patterns.

While each type of cognitive behavioral therapy takes a different approach, all work to address the underlying thought patterns that contribute to psychological distress.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Techniques

CBT is about more than identifying thought patterns. It uses a wide range of strategies to help people overcome these patterns. Here are just a few examples of techniques used in cognitive behavioral therapy.

Identifying Negative Thoughts

It is important to learn what thoughts, feelings, and situations are contributing to maladaptive behaviors. This process can be difficult, however, especially for people who struggle with introspection. But taking the time to identify these thoughts can also lead to self-discovery and provide insights that are essential to the treatment process.

Practicing New Skills

In cognitive behavioral therapy, people are often taught new skills that can be used in real-world situations. For example, someone with a substance use disorder might practice new coping skills and rehearse ways to avoid or deal with social situations that could potentially trigger a relapse.

Goal-Setting

Goal setting can be an important step in recovery from mental illness, helping you to make changes to improve your health and life. During cognitive behavioral therapy, a therapist can help you build and strengthen your goal-setting skills.

This might involve teaching you how to identify your goal or how to distinguish between short- and long-term goals. It may also include helping you set SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based), with a focus on the process as much as the end outcome.

Problem-Solving

Learning problem-solving skills during cognitive behavioral therapy can help you learn how to identify and solve problems that may arise from life stressors, both big and small. It can also help reduce the negative impact of psychological and physical illness.

Problem-solving in CBT often involves five steps:

1. Identify the problem
2. Generate a list of potential solutions
3. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each potential solution
4. Choose a solution to implement
5. Implement the solution

Self-Monitoring

Also known as diary work, self-monitoring is an important cognitive behavioral therapy technique. It involves tracking behaviors, symptoms, or experiences over time and sharing them with your therapist.

Self-monitoring can provide your therapist with the information they need to provide the best treatment. For example, for people with eating disorders, self-monitoring may involve keeping track of eating habits, as well as any thoughts or feelings that went along with consuming a meal or snack.

Additional cognitive behavioral therapy techniques may include journaling, role-playing, engaging in relaxation strategies, and using mental distractions.

What Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Can Help With

Cognitive behavioral therapy can be used as a short-term treatment to help individuals learn to focus on present thoughts and beliefs.

CBT is used to treat a wide range of conditions, including:

- Addiction
- Anger issues
- Anxiety
- Bipolar disorder
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Panic attacks
- Personality disorders
- Phobias

In addition to mental health conditions, cognitive behavioral therapy has also been found to help people cope with:

- Chronic pain or serious illnesses
- Divorce or break-ups
- Grief or loss
- Insomnia
- Low self-esteem
- Relationship problems
- Stress management

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Benefits of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

The underlying concept behind CBT is that thoughts and feelings play a fundamental role in behavior. For example, a person who spends a lot of time thinking about plane crashes, runway accidents, and other air disasters may avoid air travel as a result.

The goal of cognitive behavioral therapy is to teach people that while they cannot control every aspect of the world around them, they can take control of how they interpret and deal with things in their environment.

CBT is known for providing the following key benefits:

- It helps you develop healthier thought patterns by becoming aware of the negative and often unrealistic thoughts that dampen your feelings and moods.
- It is an effective short-term treatment option as improvements can often be seen in five to 20 sessions.
- It is effective for a wide variety of maladaptive behaviors.
- It is often more affordable than some other types of therapy.
- It is effective whether therapy occurs online or face-to-face.
- It can be used for those who don't require psychotropic medication.

One of the greatest benefits of cognitive behavioral therapy is that it helps clients develop coping skills that can be useful both now and in the future.

Effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

CBT emerged during the 1960s and originated in the work of psychiatrist Aaron Beck, who noted that certain types of thinking contributed to emotional problems. Beck labeled these "automatic negative thoughts" and developed the process of cognitive therapy.

Where earlier behavior therapies had focused almost exclusively on associations, reinforcements, and punishments to modify behavior, the cognitive approach addresses how thoughts and feelings affect behaviors.

Today, cognitive behavioral therapy is one of the most well-studied forms of treatment. It has been shown to be effective in the treatment of a range of mental conditions, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, insomnia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance use disorder.

- Research indicates that cognitive behavioral therapy is the leading evidence-based treatment for eating disorders.
- CBT has been proven helpful in those with insomnia, as well as those who have a medical condition that interferes with sleep, including those with pain or mood disorders such as depression.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy has been scientifically proven to be effective in treating symptoms of depression and anxiety in children and adolescents.

- A 2018 meta-analysis of 41 studies found that CBT helped improve symptoms in people with anxiety and anxiety-related disorders, including obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy has a high level of empirical support for the treatment of substance use disorders, helping people with these disorders improve self-control, avoid triggers, and develop coping mechanisms for daily stressors.

CBT is one of the most researched types of therapy, in part, because treatment is focused on very specific goals and results can be measured relatively easily.

Verywell Mind's Cost of Therapy Survey, which sought to learn more about how Americans deal with the financial burdens associated with therapy, found that Americans overwhelmingly feel the benefits of therapy:

- 80% say therapy is a good investment
- 91% are satisfied with the quality of therapy they receive
- 84% are satisfied with their progress toward mental health goals

Things to Consider With Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

There are several challenges that people may face when engaging in cognitive behavioral therapy. Here are a few to consider.

Change Can Be Difficult

Initially, some patients suggest that while they recognize that certain thoughts are not rational or healthy, simply becoming aware of these thoughts does not make it easy to alter them.

CBT Is Very Structured

Cognitive behavioral therapy doesn't focus on underlying, unconscious resistance to change as much as other approaches such as psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Instead, it tends to be more structured, so it may not be suitable for people who may find structure difficult.

You Must Be Willing to Change

For cognitive behavioral therapy to be effective, you must be ready and willing to spend time and effort analyzing your thoughts and feelings. This self-analysis can be difficult, but it is a great way to learn more about how our internal states impact our outward behavior.

Progress Is Often Gradual

In most cases, CBT is a gradual process that helps you take incremental steps toward behavior change. For example, someone with social anxiety might start by simply imagining anxiety-provoking social situations. Next, they may practice conversations with friends, family, and acquaintances. By progressively working toward a larger goal, the process seems less daunting and the goals easier to achieve.

How to Get Started With Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy can be an effective treatment choice for a range of psychological issues. If you or someone you love might benefit from this form of therapy, consider the following steps:

- **Consult with your physician** and/or check out the directory of certified therapists offered by the National Association of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapists to locate a licensed professional in your area. You can also do a search for "cognitive behavioral therapy near me" to find local therapists who specialize in this type of therapy.
- **Consider your personal preferences**, including whether face-to-face or online therapy will work best for you.
- **Contact your health insurance** to see if it covers cognitive behavioral therapy and, if so, how many sessions are covered per year.
- **Make an appointment** with the therapist you've chosen, noting it on your calendar so you don't forget it or accidentally schedule something else during that time.
- **Show up to your first session** with an open mind and positive attitude. Be ready to begin to identify the thoughts and behaviors that may be holding you back, and commit to learning the strategies that can propel you forward instead.

What to Expect With Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

If you're new to cognitive behavioral therapy, you may have uncertainties or fears of what to expect. In many ways, the first session begins much like your first appointment with any new healthcare provider.

During the first session, you'll likely spend some time filling out paperwork such as HIPAA forms (privacy forms), insurance information, medical history, current medications, and a therapist-patient service agreement. If you're participating in online therapy, you'll likely fill out these forms online.

Also be prepared to answer questions about what brought you to therapy, your symptoms, and your history—including your childhood, education, career, relationships (family, romantic, friends), and current living situation.

Once the therapist has a better idea of who you are, the challenges you face, and your goals for cognitive behavioral therapy, they can help you increase your awareness of the thoughts and beliefs you have that are unhelpful or unrealistic. Next, strategies are implemented to help you develop healthier thoughts and behavior patterns.

During later sessions, you will discuss how your strategies are working and change the ones that aren't. Your therapist may also suggest cognitive behavioral therapy techniques you can do yourself between sessions, such as journaling to identify negative thoughts or practicing new skills to overcome your anxiety.

15 Sources

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