

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

What is it?

The Basics

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is based on the idea that how we think (cognition), how we feel (emotion) and how we act (behavior) all interact together. Specifically, our thoughts basically determine our feelings and our behavior. Therefore, negative thoughts about things that happen in our lives can cause us distress and result in problems.

For example, after making a mistake, Alex thinks "I'm useless and can't do anything right." This thought impacts negatively on his mood and caused him to feel depressed; he then makes the problem worse by avoiding certain activities. As a result, he reduces his chance of having a successful experience, which reinforces his original thought of being "useless." In therapy, the latter example could be identified as a self-fulfilling prophecy or "problem cycle," and the efforts of the therapist and client would be to work together to change this pattern. This is done by addressing the way the client thinks in response to similar situations and by helping them think more flexibly, along with reducing their avoidance of activities. If, as a result, they change the negative thought pattern, they will already feel less depressed. They may, hopefully, also then become more active, succeed more often, and further reduce their depression.

Thoughts as the cause of emotions

Because it is not what happens to us that causes our emotions but rather *how we think about* what happens to us that causes our emotions, we can learn to think more appropriately about the events in our lives to have healthier emotions. The goal in therapy is to identify those irrational or unhealthy thoughts that lead to negative emotions and identify what it is about them that is irrational or just not helpful. This is done in an effort to reject the unhealthy thoughts and replace them with more realistic alternative thoughts.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is not an overnight process. Even after clients have learned to recognize when and where their thoughts become unhealthy, it can take much practice to replace an irrational thought process or habit with a more reasonable one. With patience and motivation, however, CBT can be a valuable tool.

Negative thinking can result from biological sources, personality traits, modeling from parents, peers or other sources. However, most of it is *learned* and is therefore a *habit*. A person who experiences depression or anxiety, for example sees negative thoughts as being beyond their control: the negative thought pattern can become automatic (habit) and self-perpetuating. Negative thinking can be categorized into a number of common patterns called "cognitive distortions." The CBT therapist provides techniques to give the client a greater degree of control over negative thinking by correcting these distortions or correcting thinking errors that stop the distortions, in a process called cognitive restructuring. The therapist will also work to educate the client on which negative emotions are healthy, and which are unhealthy (or simply not helping!).

The ABCs of Irrational Beliefs

A major aid in cognitive therapy is what Albert Ellis called the ABC Technique of Irrational Beliefs. The first three steps analyze the process by which a person has developed irrational beliefs and may be recorded in a three-column table.

A - Activating Event or objective situation. The first column records the objective situation, that is, an event that ultimately leads to some type of high emotional response or negative dysfunctional thinking.

B - Beliefs. In the second column, the client writes down the negative thoughts that occurred to them.

C - Consequence. The third column is for the negative feelings and dysfunctional behaviors

that ensued. The negative thoughts of the second column are seen as a connecting bridge between the situation and the distressing feelings. The third column C is next explained by describing emotions or negative thoughts that the client thinks are caused by A. This could be anger, sorrow, anxiety, etc.

For example, Gina is upset because she got a low mark on a math test. The Activating event, A, is that she failed her test. The Belief, B, is that she must have good grades or she is worthless. The Consequence, C, is that Gina feels depressed and incompetent.

Reframing. After irrational beliefs have been identified, the therapist will often work with the client in challenging the negative thoughts on the basis of evidence from the client's experience by reframing it, meaning to re-interpret it in a more realistic light. This helps the client to develop more rational beliefs and healthy coping strategies.

From the example above, a therapist would help Gina realize that there is no evidence that she must have good grades to be worthwhile, or that getting bad grades is awful. She desires good grades, and it would be good to have them, but it hardly makes her worthless. If she realizes that getting bad grades is disappointing, but not awful, and that it means she did not perform well on her math test or at math or at studying, but not as a person. She may feel sad or frustrated, but not depressed. The sadness and frustration are likely healthy negative emotions and may lead her to study in a more successful way from then on.

CBT with Kids

CBT is useful not only for adults, but for children and adolescents as well. Many of the techniques are similar, but modified depending on the developmental level of the child. Some examples include:

Cognitive Rehearsal In this technique, the client is asked to recall a problematic situation from his/her past. The therapist and client work on the problem to find a solution for it. The therapist asks the client to rehearse constructive thoughts in his/her mind; rehearsing positive or constructive thoughts helps in making appropriate changes to the client's thought processes. (A form of visualizing a more healthy outcome).

Validity Testing In this technique, validity of thoughts of the client are tested by the therapist; the client is asked to defend his/her viewpoint by looking for objective evidence. The faulty nature or invalidity of beliefs held by the client is exposed if he/she is unable to produce any kind of objective evidence.

Self Talk Log Maintaining a self talk log is a way to keep an account of the different situations encountered by clients in day-to-day life. Thoughts associated with these situations as well as emotions and behavior exhibited in response are also mentioned in the diary. The therapist and client review what is written in the log and try to identify the client's maladaptive thought patterns. The client and therapist then look for more rational alternatives, which then lead to more healthy emotions and behaviors.

Modeling In this exercise, the therapists perform role-playing exercises. These cognitive behavioral therapy exercises teach clients how to respond in difficult situations. The client sees the behavior of the therapist as a model to overcome his/her own behavioral problems.

Homework 'Homework' is actually a set of assignments to be completed by clients between sessions. These may vary depending on the emotional and behavioral issues of the client, but all revolve around reinforcing what is learned during sessions. (*Some good iPhone Apps are "adult CBT*ABC", "kids CBT*ABC", "CBT Tools for Kids."*)

Systematic Positive Reinforcement In this technique, a reward system is set in place to help a client replace an unwanted behavior or habit with a new, desired behavior (positive behavior). When the new behavior is demonstrated, the client is rewarded until the new behavior becomes a habit.