

# What is Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)?

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is a form of psychotherapy that focuses on understanding unhelpful patterns of thinking and behaviour and their role in generating mental health issues, and then managing those thoughts and feelings. It covers aspects of cognitive therapy as well as behavioural therapy. CBT consists of a number of techniques that aim to: 1) recognise and challenge dysfunctional beliefs and unhelpful thoughts (cognitions); 2) reduce unhelpful actions (behaviours) and increase helpful and adaptive behaviours.

Cognition means 'thinking' and CBT assumes that *thoughts* precede unpleasant feelings and emotions. These thoughts, often referred to as *automatic thoughts*, are difficult to notice and most people are only aware of the emotional change that the thoughts evoke. CBT aims to educate individuals about these thoughts and how they affect their lives. By identifying, challenging and replacing automatic thoughts that lead to unpleasant emotions, the emotional state of individuals is improved.

For example, many individuals who struggle with anxiety worry about a whole range of things that may or may not happen in the future. This may be useful to a point, in that they plan well or can identify potential risks, but it can also create a great deal of anxiety in that they become overly alert to any danger in their environment and find it difficult to tolerate any uncertainty. CBT would help such people to identify their fears, and they are then encouraged to test whether these fears are realistic and helpful.

CBT also assumes that behaviour is the consequence of some learning in the past, and that human behaviour is directed towards minimising behaviours that are followed by unpleasant consequences, and maximising behaviours that are followed by pleasant consequences. This means that undesired and maladaptive behaviours or problems (e.g., aggression, procrastination, persistent pain, compulsive checking, child tantrums etc) can be reduced by identifying and eliminating the current cycle of behaviour.

As an example, many individuals with anxiety tend to avoid entering into situations they find unpleasant even though it can have very debilitating effect on their lives. The decision to avoid unpleasant situations is followed by a short-term reduction in anxiety because the individual now knows that the feared outcome will not happen. However, this is maladaptive, as in the long term it strengthens the thought that the feared outcome would have happened (and therefore must be true), as well as increases the tendency to keep away from any events that cause anxiety. Consequently, anxiety towards the feared situation increases and the problem grows. CBT could help such individuals by designing a program where the feared situation is faced in a gradual and systematic way, without danger. The individual will then, over time, learn to be relaxed in previously feared situations by using thought and relaxation strategies.

CBT is based on extensive research (with over 325 trials on its interventions) and it has been demonstrated to be an effective treatment for a variety of mental health problems such as anxiety, mood, eating, substance abuse and psychotic disorders. In addition, there is evidence for CBT's effectiveness as a complementary treatment for medical problems (e.g., persistent pain) as well as medication compliance. As the true burden and frequency of mental health problems become more recognised, CBT is likely to include knowledge and skills that will directly or indirectly benefit the majority of individuals in some way during their life.