Cognitive behaviour therapy
Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a type of psychotherapy that helps the person to change unhelpful or unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling and behaving.

CBT involves the use of practical self-help strategies, which are designed to affect positive and immediate changes in the person’s quality of life.

CBT can be as effective as medication to treat depression and anxiety.

What is cognitive behaviour therapy?

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is an effective treatment approach for a range of mental and emotional health issues including anxiety and depression. CBT aims to help a person identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts and to learn practical self-help strategies. These strategies are designed to bring about positive and immediate changes in the person’s quality of life. CBT can be beneficial for anyone who needs support to challenge unhelpful thoughts that are preventing them from reaching their goals or living the life they want to live. CBT aims to show people how their thinking affects their mood and to teach them to think in a less negative way about life and themselves. It is based on the understanding that thinking negatively is a habit that, like any other habit, can be broken.

When CBT is useful

CBT is used to treat a range of psychological problems including:

- anxiety
- anxiety disorders such as social phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder
- depression
- low self-esteem
- uncontrollable anger
- irrational fears
- hypochondria
- substance misuse, such as smoking, drinking or other drug use
- problem gambling
- eating disorders
- insomnia
- marriage or relationship problems
- certain emotional or behavioural problems in children or teenagers.

Using CBT to treat anxiety

Everyone experiences anxiety sometimes, due to specific things or circumstances. It serves as a means of protection and can increase our performance in stressful situations. For example, the rush of anxiety that often occurs prior to a job interview or a big race often can enhance our performance.

But for some people the feeling of anxiety is more general, meaning that you feel constantly on alert or fearful no matter what activity you are doing. This can be extremely distressing and get in the way of your daily life.

If your level of anxiety does begin to interfere with your ability to function, it is important that you begin to learn some skills for coping with these anxious feelings. This is where CBT can help. It focuses on changing patterns of thinking and beliefs that are associated with, and trigger, anxiety.

Using CBT to treat depression

People with depression can have ongoing negative feelings about themselves, other people and the world around them. This negative thinking pattern can become automatic so that they don't notice when their judgment is irrational or unfair on themselves.

CBT can help people with depression by giving them tools to challenge the negative thoughts and override them with more realistic and positive thought processes.

CBT is also used to help many more psychological problems. In some cases, other forms of therapy used at the same time may be recommended for best results. Talk to your doctor for further information and advice.

CBT and the interaction of thoughts, feelings and behaviours
The main focus of CBT is that thoughts, feelings and behaviours combine to influence a person’s quality of life. For example, severe shyness in social situations (social phobia) may come from the person thinking that other people will always find them boring or stupid. This belief could cause the person to feel extremely anxious in social situations.

This could lead to certain behaviour in social situations, such as trembling, sweating, accelerated heart rate or other uncomfortable symptoms. The person could then feel overwhelmed with negative emotions (such as shame) and negative self-talk (‘I’m such an idiot’), and their fear of social situations could become worse with every bad experience.

CBT aims to teach people that it is possible to have control over their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. CBT helps the person to challenge and overcome automatic beliefs, and use practical strategies to change or modify their behaviour. The result is more positive feelings, which in turn lead to more positive thoughts and behaviours.

**CBT combines cognitive therapy and behaviour therapy**

CBT focuses on changing unhelpful or unhealthy thoughts and behaviours. It is a combination of two therapies: ‘cognitive therapy’ and ‘behaviour therapy’. The basis of both these techniques is that healthy thoughts lead to healthy feelings and behaviours.

**Cognitive therapy**

The aim of cognitive therapy is to change the way the person thinks about the issue that’s causing concern. Negative thoughts cause self-destructive feelings and behaviours. For example, someone who thinks they are unworthy of love or respect may feel withdrawn in social situations and behave shyly. Cognitive therapy challenges those thoughts and provides the person with healthier strategies.

Many techniques are available. One technique involves asking the person to come up with evidence to ‘prove’ that they are unlovable. This may include prompting the person to acknowledge the family and friends who love and respect them. This evidence helps the person to realise that their belief is false. This is called ‘cognitive restructuring’. The person learns to identify and challenge negative thoughts, and replace them with more realistic and positive thoughts.

**Behaviour therapy**

The aim of behaviour therapy is to teach the person techniques or skills to alter their behaviour. For example, a person who behaves shyly at a party may have negative thoughts and feelings about themselves. They may also lack social skills.

Behaviour therapy teaches the person more helpful behaviours. For example, they may be taught conversational skills that they practise in therapy and in social situations. Negative thoughts and feelings reduce as the person discovers they can enjoy themselves in social situations.

**Treatment with CBT**

The details of treatment will vary according to the person’s problem. However, CBT typically includes the following:

- **assessment** – this may include filling out questionnaires to help you describe your particular problem and pinpoint distressing symptoms. You will be asked to complete forms from time to time so that you and your therapist can plot your progress and identify problems or symptoms that need extra attention.
- **personal education** – your therapist provides written materials (such as brochures or books) to help you learn more about your particular problem. The saying ‘knowledge is power’ is a cornerstone of CBT. A good understanding of your particular psychological problem will help you to dismiss unfounded fears, which will help to ease your anxiety and other negative feelings.
- **goal setting** – your therapist helps you to draw up a list of goals you wish to achieve from therapy (for example, you may want to overcome your shyness in social settings). You and your therapist work out practical strategies to help fulfil these goals.
- **practise of strategies** – you practise your new strategies with the therapist. For example, you may role-play difficult social situations or realistic self-talk (how you talk to yourself in your head) to replace unhealthy or negative self-talk.
- **homework** – you will be expected to actively participate in your own therapy – for example, the therapist may ask you to keep a diary – and you are encouraged to use the practical strategies during the course of your daily life and report the results to the therapist.

**CBT and medication**

Medication is not always needed. CBT can be as effective as medication in the treatment of depression and anxiety. In other cases, you and your therapist may decide that medication, together with CBT, would produce the best results. For example, people with bipolar disorder usually benefit from medication that helps control their mood swings.

**Who provides CBT?**

Counsellors, psychologists and therapists can all provide CBT, either in one-on-one therapy sessions, small groups or online. People are trained to look logically at the evidence for their negative thoughts, and to adjust the way they view the world around them.

The therapist will provide ‘homework’ for between sessions. Generally, 6 to 10 sessions are required but the number will vary from person to person. More recently, a number of online programs (such as MoodGYM [https://moodgym.anu.edu.au/welcome] and This Way Up [https://thiswayup.org.au/]) have been developed to deliver CBT to people in their own homes.

**Issues to consider**

Before choosing CBT, issues you may like to consider include the following:

- **CBT may not be the best form of therapy** for people with any type of brain disease or injury that impairs their rational thinking.
- **CBT requires you to actively participate** in treatment. For example, you may be asked to keep detailed diaries on thoughts, feelings and behaviours. If you are not prepared to put in the work, you may be disappointed with the results of CBT.
CBT involves a close working relationship between you and your therapist. Professional trust and respect is important. If you don’t like the therapist at the first interview, look for another one.

While CBT is considered a short-term form of psychotherapy, it may still take months or longer for you to successfully challenge and overcome unhealthy patterns of thinking and behaviour. CBT may disappoint you if you are looking for a ‘quick fix’.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Psychologist
- Psychiatrist
- Psychosis and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) National Register (Family and Relationship Therapy) Tel. (03) 9486 3077
- Relationships Australia – provides counselling, mediation, dispute resolution, relationship and parenting skills education, community support, employee assistance programs and professional training. Services and programs are available nationally Tel. 1300 564 277
- 1800 RESPECT, RESPECT is the national sexual assault and family violence counselling service for people living in Australia Tel. 1800 737 732
- BeyondBlue – an independent not-for-profit organisation that provides telephone and online support for depression, anxiety, and related disorders, as well as online resources and information Tel. 1300 22 4636
- Mensline Australia provides national telephone and online support, information and referrals for men with family and relationship concerns. Tel.1300 78 9978
- QLife provides telephone and online support to help lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex communities to work towards better health, including mental health Tel. 1800 184 527
- Australian Psychological Referral Service Tel. (03) 8662 3300 or 1800 333 497
- Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria Helpline Tel. (03) 9830 0533 or 1300 ANXIETY (269 438)

References

- Treatments for depression – Psychological, Black Dog Institute, Australia. More information here.
Mental illness explained

- Early signs and intervention with mental illness
  
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives.

- Forensic mental health
  
  Forensic mental health services provide assessment and treatment of people with a mental disorder and a history of criminal offending, or those who are at risk of offending.

- Let's talk about depression in men
  
  Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his...

- Mental health first aid
  
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we’re witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

- Mental health laws and compulsory patients
  
  If you are a compulsory patient under the Mental Health Act, you have rights and there are people who can help you.

- Mental illness explained
  
  The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex, but it is known that stress can worsen an episode of mental illness.

- Mental illness treatments
  
  The correct treatment for mental illness can help a person’s condition to improve or help a person to live well, despite the presence of some ongoing symptoms.
Types of mental illness

- **Anxiety disorders**
  Anxiety disorders are common mental health problems that affect many people.

- **Bipolar disorder**
  Bipolar disorder is a type of psychosis, which means the person's perception of reality is altered. It is characterised by extreme mood swings.

- **Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)**
  People with body dysmorphic disorder constantly worry about the way they look.

- **Borderline personality disorder**
  People with borderline personality disorder may exhibit extreme behaviour, such as repeated self-mutilation or taking overdoses of medication.

- **Depression explained**
  The most important thing is to recognise the signs and symptoms and seek support.

- **Dissociation and dissociative disorders**
  Dissociation is a mental process where a person disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, memories or sense of identity.

- **Eating disorders**
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups.

- **Heart disease and mental health**
  Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover.

- **Munchausen syndrome**
  Munchausen syndrome is a mental disorder in which the patient fakes illness to gain attention and sympathy.

- **Obsessive compulsive disorder**
  Obsessive compulsive disorder can have a profound effect on a person's life.

- **Panic attack**
  Without treatment, frequent and prolonged panic attacks can be severely disabling.

- **Paranoia**
  Paranoia is the irrational and persistent feeling that people are 'out to get you' or that you are the subject of persistent, intrusive attention by others.

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**
  People with post-traumatic stress disorder often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event.

- **Psychosis**
  In psychosis, the everyday thoughts that enable us to lead our daily lives become confused.

- **Schizoaffective disorder**
  Diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder may be difficult because the symptoms are similar to bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

- **Schizophrenia**
  People with schizophrenia do not have 'split personalities' and they are not intellectually disabled.

- **Substance abuse and mental illness – dual diagnosis**
  Dual diagnosis means someone has both a mental illness and a substance use problem.

### Eating disorders

- **Anorexia nervosa**
  A common misconception is that anorexia nervosa only affects young women, but it affects males and females of all ages.

- **Binge eating disorder**
  You can recover from binge eating disorder with the right help and commitment.
**Bulimia nervosa**
Understanding the warning signs of bulimia nervosa and seeking help as soon as possible will help your recovery.

**Eating disorders**
Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups.

**Eating disorders and adolescents**
Often, an eating disorder develops as a way for an adolescent to feel in control about what's happening in their life.

**Eating disorders - support for families**
You have the potential to be a great support to your family member if they are diagnosed with an eating disorder.

**Other specified feeding or eating disorders (OSFED)**
OSFED is now one of the most common eating disorders.

### Support, services and treatment

- **Antipsychotic medications**
  Antipsychotic medications don’t cure mental illnesses, but they can reduce, or even eliminate, symptoms.

- **Counsellors**
  Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek help from a counsellor.

- **Early signs and intervention with mental illness**
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives.

- **Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)**
  ECT can be an effective treatment for some types of mental illness.

- **Mental health care plans**
  A mental health care plan explains the support provided by each member of a person's healthcare team.

- **Mental health first aid**
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we're witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

- **Mental health problems - early care helps**
  If emotional or behavioural problems are disrupting your life, it's important to seek professional help early.

- **Mental health services - case managers**
  A case manager looks after your interests while you are a client of public (government) mental health services.

- **Psychoanalysis**
  Psychoanalysis is a treatment based on the theory that our present is shaped by our past.

### Living with mental illness

- **10 tips for living with depression**
  Try to do some activity every day...

- **10 tips to improve your mental fitness**
  The brain is like a muscle – if you don’t give it a regular workout, it loses tone. Here are some tips to help you improve your mental fitness: Exercise for 30 minutes every day. Physical...

- **About mental health services in Victoria (video)**
  Victorian mental health services provide expert advice and support for people of all ages.

- **Alzheimer's disease - Early signs (video)**
  Family and friends of people with Alzheimer's disease discuss their experiences and how to recognise the early signs.

- **Eating disorders and adolescents**
  Often, an eating disorder develops as a way for an adolescent to feel in control about what's happening in their life.
• **Eating disorders - support for families**
  You have the potential to be a great support to your family member if they are diagnosed with an eating disorder.

• **Heart disease and mental health**
  Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover, and...

• **Let's talk about depression in men**
  Depression affects men of all ages, however men continue to seek help for mental health issues at significantly lower rates than women. Jonathan experienced depression and anxiety throughout his...

• **Mental health first aid**
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we're witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

• **Mental illness and violence**
  People with a mental illness who are receiving effective treatment are no more violent than anyone else in the community.

• **Mental illness - family and friends**
  You can do a lot to help your friend or relative with a mental illness, but you need to look after yourself too.

• **Strong relationships, strong health**
  Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links...

**Suicide prevention**

• **Early signs and intervention with mental illness**
  Getting help early can reduce the severity of symptoms and the impact on people’s daily lives.

• **Mental health first aid**
  We all see friends and loved ones going through rough times, but sometimes what we're witnessing is a developing mental health problem, or a mental health crisis. In preparation for these...

• **Suicide**
  In Australia, suicide is the leading cause of death for males and females aged between 15 and 44. We can all play a role in preventing suicide by looking out for possible warning signs, reaching out...

• **Suicide and mental illness**
  A suicide attempt may be an early warning sign that a person is developing a mental illness.

• **Suicide - family and friends**
  The grief felt by family and friends can be deeper when the cause of death is suicide.

• **Youth suicide – the warning sign**
  All suicide threats are serious. You don't have to be a trained professional to help a person contemplating suicide.

**Related Information**

• **Mental health problems - early care helps**
  If emotional or behavioural problems are disrupting your life, it's important to seek professional help early...

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  A case manager looks after your interests while you are a client of public (government) mental health services.

**betterhealth.vic.gov.au**
Related information on other websites

- beyondblue
- Black Dog Institute
- British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies.
- ReachOut.com – What is cognitive behavioural therapy?

Content Partner

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