

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

This resource explains what cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is, what it is for, what happens during therapy and how to find a therapist.

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What is CBT?

CBT is a type of [talking treatment](#) that focuses on how your thoughts, beliefs and attitudes affect your feelings and behaviour, and teaches you coping skills for dealing with different problems.

It combines cognitive therapy (examining the things you think) and behaviour therapy (examining the things you do).

"I have depression. [CBT is] very, very good for helping [me] not listen to [my] self critical voice, which is so damaging."

What's the theory behind CBT?

CBT is based on the idea that the way we think about situations can affect the way we feel and behave. For example, if you interpret a situation negatively then you might experience negative emotions as a result, and those bad feelings might then lead you to behave in a certain way.

How does negative thinking start?

Negative thinking patterns can start from childhood onwards. For example, if you didn't receive much attention or praise from your parents or teachers at school, you might've thought "I'm useless, I'm not good enough".

Over time you might come to believe these assumptions, until as an adult these negative thoughts become automatic. This way of thinking might then affect how you feel at work, university or in your general life.

If your negative interpretation of situations goes unchallenged, then these patterns in your thoughts, feelings and behaviour can become part of a continuous cycle:



How does CBT work?

In CBT you work with a therapist to identify and challenge any negative thinking patterns and behaviour which may be causing you difficulties. In turn this can change the way you feel about situations, and enable you to change your behaviour in future.

You and your therapist might focus on what is going on in your life right now, but you might also look at your past, and think about how your past experiences impact the way you see the world.

“CBT is learning to stop the cycle of negative thinking. I still have relapses now and it is the one tool that I use to get me out of the truly dark spots.”

What types of problems can CBT help with?

CBT is a relatively flexible therapy that can be adapted to meet your particular needs. Evidence suggests it can be an effective treatment for a range of mental health problems, such as:

- anxiety and panic attacks
- bipolar disorder
- borderline personality disorder
- depression
- eating problems
- obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- phobias
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- psychosis
- schizophrenia

[The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence \(NICE\)](#) particularly recommends CBT for depression and anxiety. There are also formal adaptations of CBT to treat particular mental health problems, such as phobias, eating disorders, PTSD and OCD.

You may also be offered CBT for:

- anger problems
- [drug or alcohol problems](#)
- sexual and relationship problems
- insomnia (inability to sleep)

“CBT got me through my chronic health anxiety disorder. It was a tough six months, but I still use the skills I learnt over 10 years ago to rationalise with myself.”

CBT can also help you find new ways to cope with physical health problems, such as:

- chronic fatigue syndrome
- chronic pain
- habits or problems, such as facial tics
- general health problems

You may also be offered CBT if you are experiencing a mental health problem alongside a physical health problem. The tools and techniques you learn during CBT can often be applied to other problems in the future.

Does CBT work without medication?

For some people CBT can work just as well as [medication](#) for treating problems like depression and anxiety disorders.

Depending on the symptoms you experience, your doctor might suggest that a combination of CBT and medication, such as an [antidepressant](#), might be more effective for you. If you want to discuss whether CBT is the right treatment for you, you can talk to your GP (also see our page on [is CBT for me? and having your say in treatment](#)).

"I had CBT... when I had severe depression. It got me through a really tough time, from being suicidal and off work on long term sick [leave], to fully functioning again and now in a successful career. I found it worked really well in combination with antidepressants. It pulled me back from a very dark place and reintroduced structure to my life when I'd given up."

What should I expect from a CBT session?

In this section you can find information about:

- how is CBT delivered?
- how are sessions structured?
- what might I learn?
- What's the therapeutic relationship like?
- Can I do CBT by myself?

How is CBT delivered?

CBT is usually a short-term treatment, so you wouldn't be expected to continue with the treatment for a long time. For example, a course of CBT might be delivered in 12 hour-long weekly sessions, spread across 12 weeks. In some areas, you may be offered four sessions initially, with the opportunity for more if you need them.

These sessions might be delivered:

- **individually** – one to one with a therapist (either face-to-face, over the phone or over a video call)
- **in a group** – with other people who may have similar problems
- **through a self-help book** – you might be asked to complete exercises from a book by yourself
- **through a computer (usually online)** – you may be offered [computerised CBT](#).

CBT should only be delivered by a trained health care professional. Refresher CBT programmes may be available if you have already completed a course of CBT (your GP may know more about options in your area).

Computerised CBT

Some research suggests that computerised CBT could be helpful for some people, although it's not yet known how well it works.

There are some online CBT programmes available, for example [Beating the Blues](#) for [depression](#). If you want to use a programme like Beating the Blues for free, you will need a referral from your GP or other service-provider. Some online CBT programmes include phone or email contact with a therapist assigned to you.

It can be difficult to decide whether an online programme is right for you. It's best to try and use one that has been recommended by your GP or another professional. If you're finding it hard to stick to or complete a computerised CBT course, talk to your GP about other options.

How are sessions structured?

A typical structure of a CBT session may include the following:

- At the beginning of the therapy, you and your therapist may explore the problems you want to work on.
- When you have agreed which problems you want to focus on and what your goals are, you may start planning the content of sessions and talking about how you could deal with your problems.
- During the session, you might work through exercises with your therapist to explore your thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This may be in the form of diagrams or worksheets.
- With CBT you are often given work to do in your own time, so the end of each session you might agree on some exercises to work on afterwards.
- At the beginning of your next session your therapist might start by going over the conclusions from your previous session, and discussing what progress you've made with any work you agreed to do.

“My therapist gives me goals that I must achieve before the next session. They are challenging, yet achievable.”

What might I learn?

CBT teaches coping skills for dealing with different problems. You may learn ways of coping with different situations, thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

For example:

Problem	Way of coping
Feeling anxious	You may learn that avoiding situations could actually increase fears. Confronting fears in a gradual and manageable way can give you faith in your own ability to cope.
Feeling depressed	You may be encouraged to record your thoughts and explore how you can look at them differently. This may help to break the downward spiral of your mood.
Sleep problems	You may learn to recognise the thoughts which make falling to sleep more difficult and learn to challenge these.
Long standing problems relating to other people	You may learn to check out your assumptions about other people's motivation for doing things, rather than often assuming the worst.

“It can be daunting when faced with a list of things you can't do, but CBT helped me to break up my goals into manageable chunks.”

What's the therapeutic relationship like?

One to one CBT can bring you into a kind of relationship you may not have had before.

CBT favours an equal, non-judgemental relationship between you and your therapist. They should seek your views and reactions to your experiences, which then shape the way your therapy progresses. The collaborative style means that you are actively involved in the therapy.

This therapeutic relationship may help you feel able to open up and talk about things that are difficult or personal to you.

"I was encouraged to try [CBT] again with a different therapist and have just had my 3rd session. I like the therapist and am getting on much better.....the therapist makes a BIG difference!"

Can I do CBT by myself?

It is possible to do CBT by yourself, through a self-help book or online. You may find that it's helpful to try while you are waiting for further treatment – or to remind yourself of some of the techniques.

But research suggests that CBT is usually more effective if you're working with a therapist. And some specific kinds of CBT treatments aren't suitable to try on your own (for example [exposure and response prevention](#) for OCD) – in this case getting support from a therapist is really important.

Talk to your healthcare professional about whether it might help to do some CBT by yourself while you are waiting.

Is CBT right for me?

Although many people can benefit from CBT, not everyone finds it helpful. You might find that it just doesn't suit you, or doesn't meet your needs.

"I think it can go either way. I've been through a long course of CBT a few years ago, and for some people it helped, whereas for others it didn't."

Before deciding to have CBT, it might be helpful to think about the following:

- **Is short-term therapy right for me?** If you have severe or complex problems, you may find a short-term therapy like CBT is less helpful. Sometimes, therapy may need to go on for longer to cover fully the number of problems you have, and the length of time they've been around.
- **Am I comfortable thinking about my feelings?** CBT can involve becoming aware of your anxieties and emotions. Initially, you may find this process uncomfortable or distressing.
- **How much time do I want to spend?** CBT can involve exercises for you to do outside of your sessions with a therapist. You may find this means you need to commit your own time to complete the work over the course of treatment, and afterwards.

- **Do I have a clear problem to solve?** You may find CBT is less suitable if you feel generally unhappy or unfulfilled, but don't have troubling symptoms or a particular aspect of your life you want to work on.

"I found the first month so terrifying and draining because it dragged up things from the past that I never knew had impacted on me..."

Comparisons with other types of short-term psychological therapy aren't clear-cut. Other [talking treatments](#), for example psychodynamic therapy or interpersonal therapy might also be effective. But there's not been as much research into other types of therapy so it can be hard to say what might work best. You can talk to your doctor about which treatment might be most suitable for you.

What if I don't find CBT helpful or my problem comes back?

Not everyone finds that the course of CBT they've been offered helps as much as they'd like. In this case you might want to think about the options below.

- **Talk to your CBT therapist about your feelings** (if you are currently receiving CBT). They may be able to talk through your concerns and help you get more out of the sessions.
- **Find a different therapist.** If things don't feel right, or you don't have a good relationship with your therapist, you may not get the most out of your sessions. You might find that you have a very different experiences with a different therapist. Talk to your GP or the organisation giving you CBT about seeing someone else.
- **Ask your GP for a longer course, or a different treatment.** Try to be honest about how you feel and what you need. (See our pages on seeking help for a mental health problem for more tips on how to talk to your doctor.)

"I had previously tried this form of therapy when I was first diagnosed, which I didn't find helpful ... however the second time I tried it, it completely changed my life."

How can I find a CBT therapist?

You might be able to access CBT on the NHS through:

- **Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT).** This is an NHS programme which can provide CBT as a treatment for various mental health problems, such as [anxiety](#) and [depression](#). You can usually get in touch with them directly (self refer). However, IAPT is not available in all areas and the waiting lists can be long. You can find out whether IAPT services are available near you through the [NHS Choices website](#).
- **Your GP surgery.** Some counsellors and psychologists offer CBT on the NHS at GP surgeries. Your GP may also be able to refer you to CBT in your area or give you a login for an online CBT programme.
- **[Your community mental health team](#) (CMHT).** Some nurses, doctors, occupational therapists and clinical psychologists working in CMHTs may also provide CBT.
- **Some NHS Trusts** have specialist therapy services.

Your GP may be able to give you information about local services.

"I still get anxious but CBT helped me to gain insight and perspective. It was the start of my journey to recovery, though not the only part. I did a 6 week CBT course through IAPT."

Through the private sector

You may want to consider seeing a therapist privately – but be aware that private therapists usually charge for appointments. You can find a private therapist through:

- the [British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy](#) (BACP), which is a membership organisation and a registered charity that sets standards for therapeutic practice. The BACP has a ['find a therapist' directory](#) of registered and non-registered therapists. The BACP also has [guidance about finding the right therapist for you](#).
- the [British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapists](#) (BABCP), has a [register of accredited CBT therapists](#). Therapists on the register have specialist skills and knowledge and have undergone relevant training and supervision.

Your therapist's qualifications

It's good practice for a therapist to be a member of a professional body, such as the [BACP](#), [BABCP](#) or [The British Psychological Society](#) (BPS). You can ask them about their professional qualifications and training. You can also check these with their professional body.

For more information about finding a therapist, see our pages on [accessing talking treatments](#) and [seeking help through the private sector](#).

Useful contacts

Mind's services

- **Helplines** – our Infoline and Legal Line provide information and support by phone, email and text. Our Blue Light Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families. For all contact details and opening times, [see our helplines page](#).
- **Local Minds** – there are over 140 local Minds across England and Wales which provide services such as [talking treatments](#), [peer support](#), and [advocacy](#). [Find your local Mind here](#), and contact them directly to see how they can help.
- **Elefriends** is a supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem. See our [Elefriends page](#) for details.

Beating the Blues

beatingtheblues.co.uk

Computerised CBT available free through some NHS trusts to help manage depression and anxiety. You need a referral to use this site.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

0161 705 4304

babcp.com

A group for people involved in the practice and theory of behavioural and cognitive psychotherapy. It has an online register of accredited CBT therapists.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

01455 883 300

itsgoodtotalk.org.uk

A membership organisation and a registered charity that sets standards for therapeutic practice. It has an online directory of accredited counsellors and psychotherapists in the UK.

British Psychological Society (BPS)

0116 254 9568

bps.org.uk

Provides a list of chartered psychologists.

Fearfighter

fearfighter.cbtprogram.com

Computerised CBT available free through some NHS trusts to help manage panic and phobia. You need a referral to use this site.

NHS Choices

nhs.uk

Find information and search for local services – including IAPT services.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

nice.org.uk

Reports and guidelines on various mental health problems and treatments.

Samaritans

24-hour helpline: 116 123 (freephone)

jo@samaritans.org

samaritans.org

Emotional support for anyone feeling down or struggling to cope.

United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)

020 7014 9955

psychotherapy.org.uk

A professional body for the education, training and accreditation of psychotherapists and psychotherapeutic counsellors. It has an online register of psychotherapists offering different talking treatments privately.

References are available on request.

If you require this information in Word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email: publications@mind.org.uk