

What do You Think About Cognitive Therapy?

Stephan P. Michener, LCSW

Cognitive Therapy- What is it? Very simply it is one of the most popular and practiced form of counseling used by therapists for the past several decades. Like many ideas that get recycled and given new names, Cognitive therapy has undergone “transformations” through the years and has been called Rational Emotive Behavior therapy, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Rational Living Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and many more. What gets emphasized varies from one type to another, but the underlying premise is pretty much the same. I’ll discuss that here.

Cognitive therapy is simply the act of objectively looking at the thoughts that people have and recognizing how those thoughts sometimes impede fulfillment and contentment. The things we tell ourselves about the situations we find ourselves in, result in the feelings we have. Put in a graphic manner

EVENTS lead to → THOUGHTS lead to → EMOTIONS/BEHAVIORS

Often people will say something like “When (something happened) I felt (a particular emotion). In other words something that happened caused them to feel a certain way. For instance “When the store clerk ignored me I felt angry and neglected.” The link between an event and a feeling seems immediate. In cognitive therapy we call this “automatic thinking.” It happens so quickly we may not even be aware that we actually do have thoughts about what happened. If we were to look at this situation in slow motion it might be that after the event of being ignored by the clerk, the person thought “this clerk could care less about me and they must think I’m worthless.” This thought would then lead to feelings of sadness, frustration and anger. In cognitive therapy the thoughts and interpretations about the event are explored.

Through the process of cognitive therapy we identify the thoughts and then explore their accuracy and usefulness to the person. People have all sorts of thoughts that they blindly accept and consistently fail to scrutinize the thoughts for accuracy and usefulness. The very first thing a cognitive therapist will do is to help you recognize exactly what your thoughts are. Early on in therapy I often repeat some of the things my clients say, which is a way of pointing out to them their thoughts. It’s like holding up a mirror to the thought so that it can be recognized. I especially want to recognize the thoughts that seem to be part of a pattern, which we will examine more closely in therapy sessions.

There can be patterns of thoughts which lead to depression, anxiety, anger and relationship problems. Once a person begins to have more awareness of their thoughts and thinking patterns, they have taken a big step towards improving their situation. The next thing that has to be done is to examine the thoughts more closely for accuracy and usefulness. There are actually about 25 types of “cognitive twists” that people often engage in. A cognitive therapist can be like a teacher helping the student apply the scientific method to their thoughts. The thought is a hypothesis which may lead to problematic emotions and behaviors, have inaccuracies or prevent someone from reaching their goals. If the thought turns out to be inaccurate or not useful then it needs to be replaced by the individual with a more accurate and useful thought.

This is where things get exciting because people begin to see new possibilities and opportunities for themselves. It’s like they were looking at things through a distorted and blurry pair of glasses, and now their lenses are more sharply focused. I refer to this as “Cognitive Self Therapy” because my clients determine the thoughts which need replacing and they develop their own new perspectives. Through the use of “homework” people are encouraged to use what they’ve gained in therapy out in the “real world.” This makes progress rapid and allows them to develop a skill that they will have for the rest of their lives. Once these techniques are learned they can be applied to every situation where people struggle with negative feelings and unresolved conflict.

But not everyone does well with Cognitive therapy. If you are looking for a therapist who only passively listens and nods once in a while as you vent your frustrations, Cognitive Therapy isn’t for you. If you are hoping to be in therapy for several months and maybe even a couple of years, cognitive therapy may not be for you. Finally, if your desire is to find a therapist who practices the latest form of esoteric healing arts from the far east or the west coast, Cognitive therapy may not be for you. But if you are looking for a straight forward structured therapy approach that has a long history of solid empirically based evidence on it’s effectiveness, Cognitive Therapy might be for you. If you not only want to feel better but actually make your situation better then you might want to give Cognitive therapy a try. What do you think?