

## Introduction to Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) Concepts

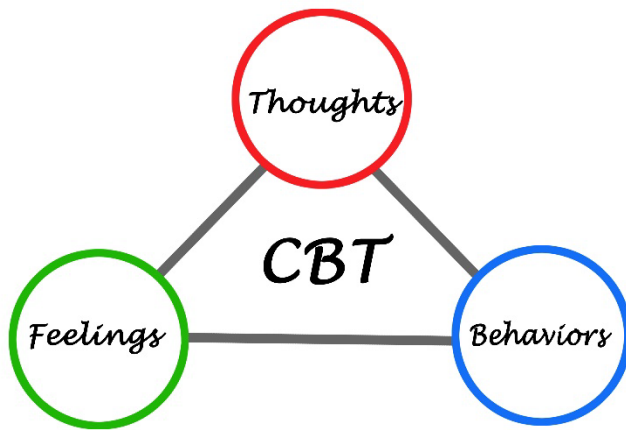
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Here is an introduction to some key concepts and steps in Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT).

### Thought—Feeling—Behavior Relationship

Our thoughts, feelings and behavior are connected. Changing one of these alters the others.



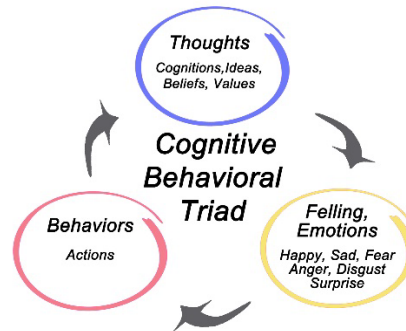
If we act (or behave) less afraid in a scary situation, we will actually feel less afraid, and our thoughts will be less scary thoughts than if we were to respond in a scared manner (e.g., running or hiding).

If we feel excited in a situation, such as on a roller coaster, we are not likely to have scary thoughts about the roller coaster, nor are we likely to act or 'behave' in a scared fashion. If we feel scared about the roller coaster, we are likely to have scary thoughts about the ride, and we are likely to respond in a scared fashion (e.g., shaking, shortness of breath, avoiding the ride).

If we have scary thoughts about a situation, we are likely to feel anxious and to respond in an anxious way. If we have confident thoughts about a situation, we are likely to feel confident and to respond in a confident way.

### Thoughts are Where We Start

Most of the time it is our thoughts that influence our feelings, and ultimately our behavior. How we interpret a situation, or what we tell ourselves about that situation, will determine how we feel about the situation, which again will influence how we respond to the situation.



Most of our everyday situations can be viewed in both positive and negative ways (note, this is NOT in reference to traumatic events or loss of a loved one; this is for everyday situations that tend to trigger unpleasant feelings and problematic responses). Here are some examples:

#### Stuck in Traffic:

If I think, "Why can't these idiots get off the road? This is wasting so much of my time!" I'm going to feel angry and stressed. I'm at risk for driving aggressively or making an impulsive mistake because I'm upset.

If I think, "Traffic is really slow today. I hope there hasn't been an accident. I don't like when it takes so long to get to the office, but at least I'm not late because I've been in an accident, and I have more time to listen to the podcast I started yesterday. I'm going to feel much calmer and only reasonably frustrated.

Traffic didn't change, but my thoughts were different, and this led to feeling differently and responding differently.

#### A Crowded Grocery Store

If I think, "I can't go in there. Everyone will look at me. It's going to take forever to get out of there!" I'm going to feel anxious, overwhelmed, and a bit hopeless. I'm likely to avoid going into the store, or if I go in, I may rush and forget items I need.

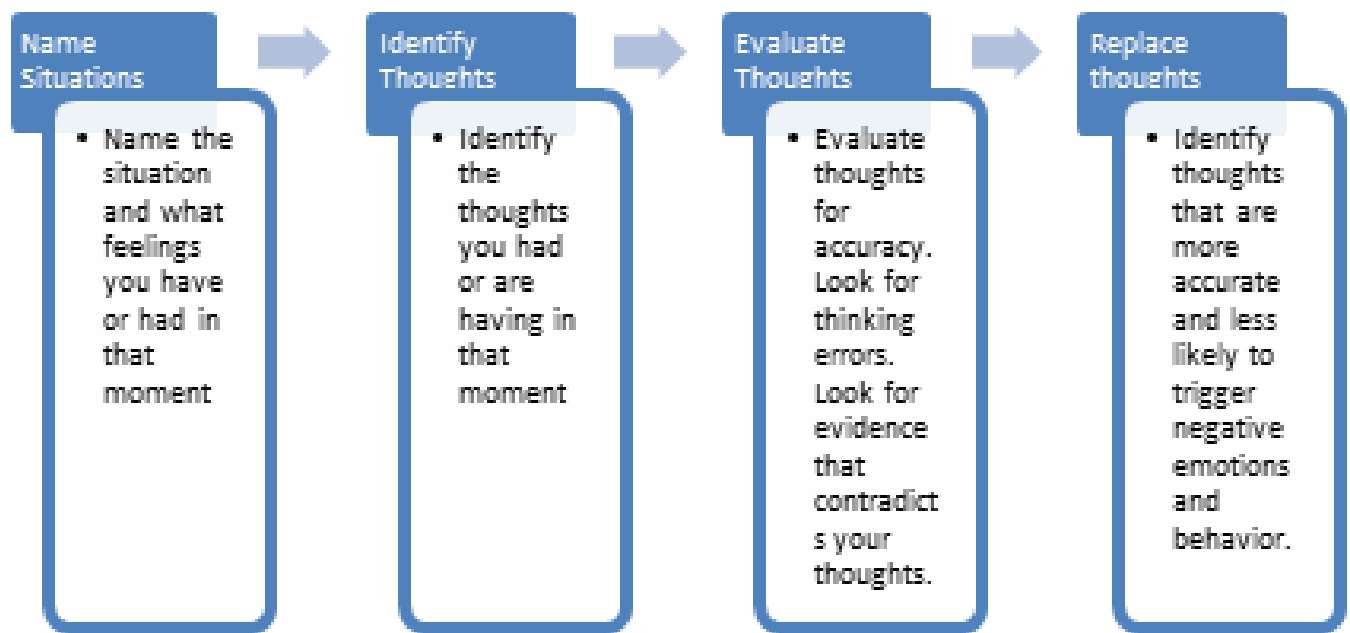
If I think, "There seems to be a lot of people shopping today. It might take me longer than usual, but it won't take forever, and I've got some extra time." I'm going to feel more relaxed and calm and I'm going to be able to complete my shopping without much stress.

The situation didn't change, but my thoughts were different, and this led to feeling differently and responding differently.

Our thoughts are very powerful. By becoming aware of our thoughts and learning to *manage* them, we begin to gain power over both our feelings and our behavior.

### The Steps

There are four key steps to changing unhealthy/inaccurate thoughts to healthier, more accurate thoughts that are less likely to trigger problematic emotions or behaviors.



Step 1. Identify the situation. We must recognize the situation in order to evaluate whether our thoughts were accurate and reasonable. In addition, it is important to be on the lookout for a pattern of situations that tend to act as 'triggers,' so that you can be on guard when the situation happens again. Be aware of how you felt, and how you responded.

2. Identify the thoughts. This can be tricky because our thoughts often occur automatically, and we are not always aware of what we are thinking. It can be helpful to practice asking yourself, "What am I thinking right now?" throughout the day...in positive situations, negative situations, and even neutral situations. This helps you become aware of how your thoughts are associated with various emotions and behavior.

3. Examine and evaluate the thoughts. We tend to assume that if we have a thought, it must be true. In reality, that is not always the case. There are many times are thoughts are distorted and inaccurate. An important step in creating change in our mood and behavior is being able to recognize thoughts that are 'triggering' our responses. There are many common 'thinking

errors' to look for including: catastrophizing, mind reading, all or none thinking, discounting the positive, crystal ball predictions, and over-generalizing.

Catastrophizing refers to blowing things out of proportion and assuming the smallest thing is a catastrophe. I'm out of shampoo so my hair won't look right for my job interview, which means they won't want to hire me, and I'll never get a job and I'm going to be homeless. Catastrophizing is a very common thinking error when we are anxious; after all, who wouldn't be anxious when faced with a catastrophe? And who wouldn't respond in a somewhat panicked and extreme way if faced with a true catastrophe? But it's important to examine whether the situation we are facing is truly a catastrophe, or whether we can put it into perspective differently; put into perspective, most situations are not true catastrophes and do not warrant panic or extreme reactions.

Mind Reading refers to believing that we know what others are thinking and feeling, and that we know what they will do. The truth is, we cannot know with certainty what others are thinking or feeling, or how they will respond in a situation. Mind reading is a common thinking error when we are angry, anxious, or depressed. Being angry with someone because we 'think' we know their reason and motivation for doing something is a bit like being angry with someone for something they did in our dreams. Likewise, feeling anxious before entering a store because we think that others will be looking at us and judging us is not only highly inaccurate (most people ignore everyone else in the store), but it can also be extremely limiting, as we make decisions to limit our activities based on what we (incorrectly) believe others are thinking. Similar difficulties are created when depression is associated with mind reading; we feel lonely and yet choose to isolate ourselves because we (incorrectly) believe that others do not want to be with us. By recognizing when we are trying to use "mind reading powers" that are highly likely to be inaccurate, we can begin to approach situations, and people, in a way that is more reality based and likely associated with less anger, anxiety, and depression.

All or none thinking refers to black and white thinking, with no recognizing of 'grey areas.' This can include assuming someone is 'all bad' or 'all good' based on one interaction, without recognizing that we all have moments when we may not be at our best. All or none thinking can lead us to feel like a failure when we make one mistake or do not succeed at one activity. This is closely related to over-generalizing, when we assume one negative thing means all things will be negative.

Discounting the Positive refers to dismissing anything positive as being not important, or as somehow "not counting." This is an extremely common thinking error in depression, as depression tends to be associated with a 'negative filter.' When depressed, we may feel that no one cares about us, ignoring the fact that we received 3 text messages from friends or family that day. Depression may also make excuses as to why something positive doesn't count, such as, "It doesn't count that my spouse says I'm attractive. They have to say that." When examining our thoughts for accuracy, it is important to look for evidence that could contradict our negative thought, and to recognize any instances in which we are 'discounting the positive.'

Crystal Ball Predictions refers to believing that we can predict the future; similar to 'mind reading,' it is assuming we have a superpower that we do not actually have. Crystal ball predictions of the future are almost always negative, leading us to feel anxious, hopeless and helpless. There are also times when crystal ball predictions can be incorrectly positive and lead to impulse behavior (e.g., I just bought \$2000 worth of lottery tickets this morning and I know I'm going to win. I'm going to go ahead and book a non-refundable trip to Europe so I can surprise my family tonight when they announce the winning lottery numbers). Letting our emotions be dictated by our predictions of the future, which are likely to be inaccurate, and certainly making decisions about how to respond to situations based on those likely wrong predictions, is never a healthy approach.

Over-Generalizing refers to assuming that the outcome, usually negative, of one situation will apply to all similar situations. If I meet someone on a first date and they say I'm too short, every person I go on a date with is going to think I'm too short. If I didn't get that job, I'll never get any job. When we over-generalize negative events, we create feelings of hopelessness about the future because we have convinced ourselves that all future situations will also go poorly. In reality, one bad experience does not mean that all experiences will be bad. In fact, 10 bad experiences do not guarantee that the 11<sup>th</sup> experience will also go badly. Being able to recognize over-generalization can reduce anxiety and hopelessness, leaving us more open to the possibility of experiencing a positive outcome.

4. Replace the thought with a more accurate thought that is less likely to be associated with anxiety, sadness, or anger. This is *not* simply "thinking positive." Telling ourselves positive things that are not true, or that we do not believe, will not be helpful. Because thoughts are the primary trigger for our emotional and behavioral responses, being able to identify healthier, more helpful thoughts can lead to drastic change in our mood, and our actions.

Let's examine some replacement thoughts for our thinking error examples; these replacement thoughts are more realistic, and less likely to trigger problematic emotional or behavioral responses.

Catastrophizing Thought: I'm out of shampoo so my hair won't look right for my job interview, which means they won't want to hire me, and I'll never get a job and I'm going to be homeless.

Replacement Thought: My hair may not look 'perfect,' but it's not going to be that bad. And no one hires someone for this type of job based on what their hair looks like, anyway. I have the skills for this job, and that's what they're going to be focused on, so that's what I'm going to focus on.

Mind Reading Thought: Everyone will be looking at me and judging me if I go into the store.

Replacement Thought: Everyone in the store is there to do their shopping and most people are just as busy and rushed as I am. No one really cares about anyone else in the store...they're hardly paying attention, which is why they don't see to move their cart out of the way when I'm trying to get by. Even though my brain tells me everyone will be looking at me, the truth is, no one is paying attention to anything but their own shopping.

All or None Thought: My partner did not pick up the dry cleaning like I asked; they are thoughtless, selfish, and undeserving of my love.

Replacement Thought: It's frustrating that they did not pick up the dry cleaning, but they had a hectic day, and we all forget to do things on days like that. They were willing to do it, and they are often willing to run errands when I ask. They were not being thoughtless or selfish when they simply forgot to do this, and I know they deserve my love.

Discounting the Positive Thought: It doesn't matter that my family came to visit last month; if they loved me, they would come every month.

Replacement Thought: It's hard for my son to make time for a 3 hour drive, each way, with 3 teenagers; he and his spouse have busy jobs, and the kids have so many activities they are involved in, not to mention their school. I wish I could see them more often, but the fact that they make sure to see me as often as they do shows they love me.

Crystal Ball Prediction: There's no sense in me submitting my poetry in the writer's contest because I'm not going to win.

Replacement Thought: There's no way for me to know whether the judges will be drawn to my style of writing. Maybe they'll really like it. Even if I don't win, someone may like my writing and ask me to write something for them. There's no harm in trying and not winning...I'll submit my poetry and see what happens.

Over-Generalizing Thought: My date thought I was too short. Everyone is going to think I'm too short so I'm not even going to bother trying to date.

Replacement Thought: So that person wasn't in to dating someone my height. That's a weird thing to care about, since it doesn't have anything to do with whether someone is a good person or whether a relationship will be good. But I wouldn't want to be in a relationship with someone who thought that kind of thing was important, anyway. I can't be the only person who doesn't care about superficial things like height. Someone out there will want to get to know me, regardless of my height. I'll keep looking.

### Challenging Truths

Two of the primary challenges in applying CBT strategies is recognizing these two truths:

*Just because we think it, doesn't mean it's true.*

*Just because we feel it, doesn't mean it's justified.*

These are exceptionally challenging truths to accept. We like to believe that we are rational, well-reasoned individuals who always think clearly. But that's not how our brains work. We all have times when we have distorted thoughts. We all have times when the intensity of our feelings is not necessary or justified by the situation; our feelings may be understandable, but the intensity of those feelings may not be justified. For example, it's *understandable* that people feel nervous when speaking in front of a group, but the situation doesn't warrant panic attacks and sleepless nights; the intensity of the feeling does not match the actual "danger" of the situation.

When examining and evaluating your thoughts for accuracy, it's important to remember that not all our thoughts are true, and not all our feelings are necessary or justified.

### Conclusion

Our thoughts, feelings and behavior are connected, with our thoughts being the primary driver for our feelings and behavior. A key concept in Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is learning to

manage or regulate thoughts. By recognizing thinking errors, and replacing them with more accurate thoughts, we can often avoid or diminish problematic responses that involve anger, sadness, or anxiety.

Research has demonstrated that this CBT process contributes to improvement in many conditions, including depression, anxiety, PTSD, addiction, and more. That does not mean that CBT is a cure-all; we cannot make all our troubles go away by following the 4 steps listed in this article. But we can greatly reduce emotional distress and problematic reactions, making situations more manageable, when we use these strategies.

As mentioned previously, this is not simply "thinking positive," as denying reality and trying to lie to ourselves with positive mantras will not help at all. Positive thoughts and mantras must be true in order to be helpful. We must be able to acknowledge the negative while also looking at it in a healthy, accurate way.

Finally, it is important to remember that it can be challenging to implement these strategies. Sometimes our thoughts are so automatic it is difficult (but not impossible) for us to learn to be aware of what we are thinking. Sometimes depression and anxiety have us so committed to holding onto our negative thoughts that it is difficult (but not impossible) for us to learn to identify more accurate replacement thoughts.

### Taking Action

You can begin to practice these CBT strategies by downloading the "CBT Steps" handout, "Thought Record" worksheet, and "CBT Questions" list. There are numerous books available from your local library, bookstore, or Amazon.com that provide guidance in learning to apply these strategies. It can also be helpful to work with a mental health professional, if accessible, for help in problem solving any challenges you experience when practicing these strategies.

