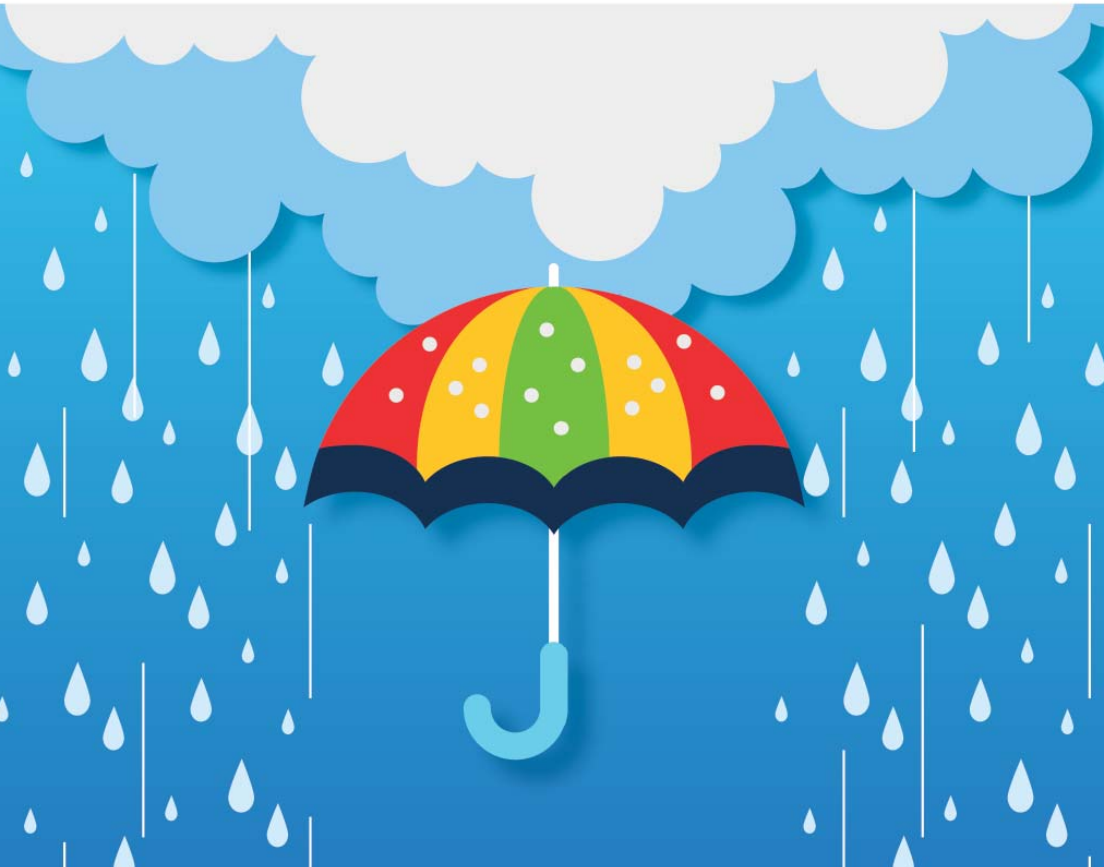


Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Factsheet for Symptoms of Stress
& Breaking the Vicious Cycle



Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

How we think about something or a situation can make us feel a range of emotions. Negative thoughts or appraisals about a situation can activate the fight or flight response as we feel stressed and threatened.

This may cause us to behave in a stressed-out way and we may avoid situations, act out emotionally or withdraw from support networks.

If we believe that difficulty concentrating or struggling to make decisions is the result of something bad happening, then we may feel negative emotions. We may be scared for our health, anxious or embarrassed, or we may feel out of control or incompetent at work.

In experiencing these emotions, we may start to think overly negative thoughts like 'this is absolutely the worst', 'I cannot cope', 'I have no control any more' or 'I'm not good enough'. This can affect self-esteem and cause low mood.

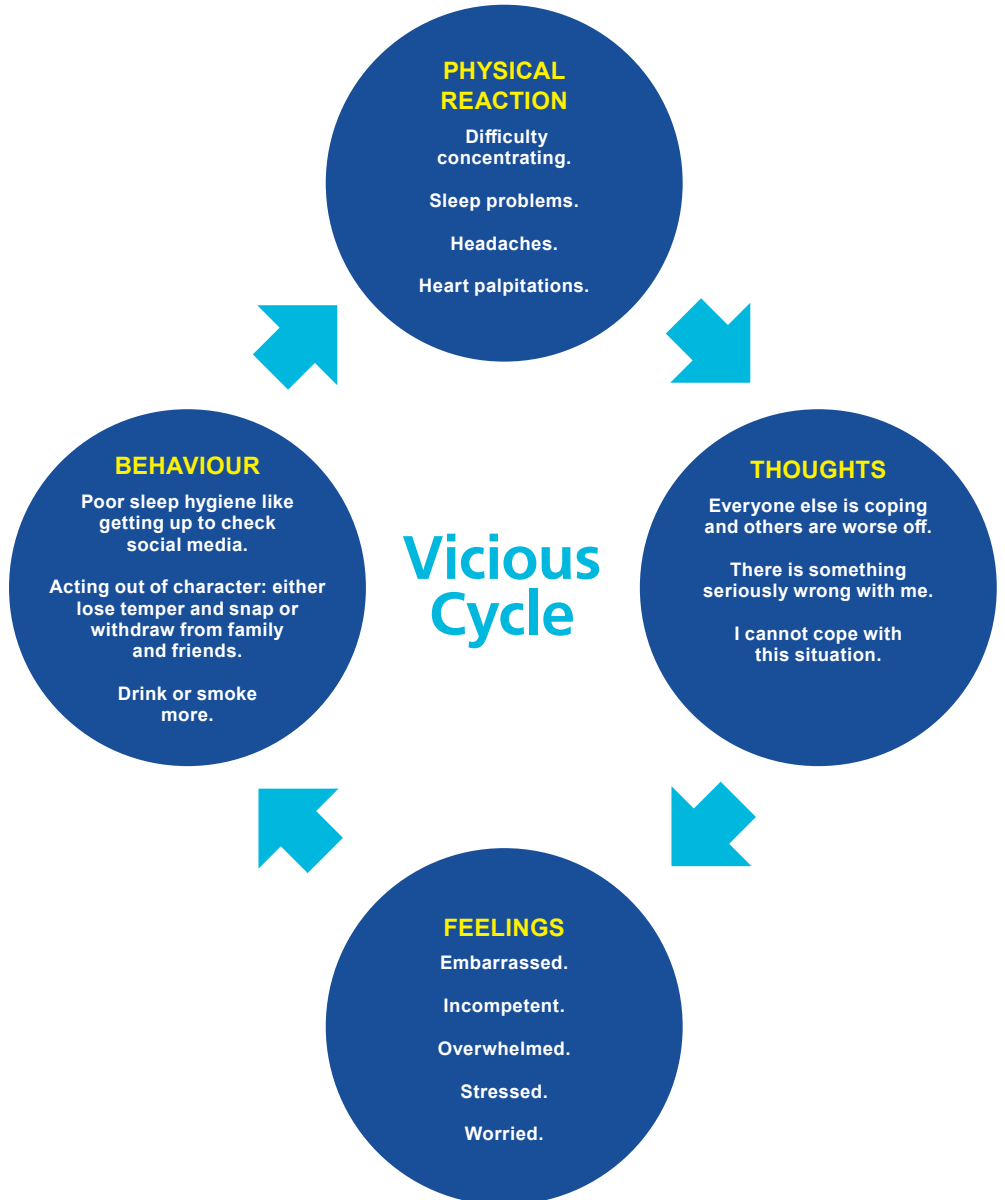
Feeling stressed and anxious due to life's multiple demands may also worsen the ability to concentrate on a task or make decisions. In turn this can affect other aspects of life; we may have difficulty sleeping or may wake up early worrying, or we may feel too fatigued to exercise.

This relationship is sometimes called the vicious cycle with one area influencing the other.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy examines the body's physical stress response and the interaction with our thoughts and behaviour and introduces self-care strategies to help manage these symptoms. Multiple stressful triggers like work, childcare, elder care, relationship issues and financial problems can have a negative influence on our thoughts, emotions and behaviours. This can impact the severity of the physical symptoms and vice versa.

The impact that Covid-19 has had throughout the world and on our day-to-day life is unique, and so it is quite normal to feel overwhelmed and stressed. This doesn't mean you are a failure or that you are not good enough for your role or are not contributing enough.

However, if we do not allow the body to 'stand down' or 'rest and digest', the anxiety about this situation will become chronic and burnout will occur. People, especially health care workers, only reach out for help or to talk when depression and/or anxiety become severe and life limiting.



Strategies and coping mechanisms to interrupt and break the vicious cycle

Knowledge and Behaviour

- Understand that the current situation has never happened before in our lifetime, and it is perfectly normal to feel anxious, worried and stressed. Other personal factors will also contribute to how we think, feel and respond to it.
- There is help available, so access it or talk to someone if you notice your thoughts, feelings and behaviour are changing – before the problem gets severe.
- Regular exercise is not only good for physical health but also improves mood, stress levels and mental wellbeing. Taking a daily walk outside will help reduce levels of cortisone, one of the stress hormones.
- In the absence of being able to access your normal support networks, organise a virtual coffee morning or ring friends and family daily.
- Set yourself a goal or achievement that you've always wanted to do and set aside regular time for it. Organise old photos into an album, declutter the shed, pick up the guitar, take up yoga.
- Create a routine of working and leisure time. Limit alcohol to days off from work and don't drink more than the recommended 14 units per week.
- Stress and diet are linked, and if you are experiencing high levels of stress it is probable that your digestive tract will be under strain. Take processed foods, sugar and caffeine in moderation. Eat 5 pieces of fruit or vegetables a day, and on a particularly stressful day eat little and often to prevent high and low energy levels. Whole grain foods are thought to improve levels of serotonin, the hormone linked to mood. Nuts are high in magnesium, the mineral that assists in muscle relaxation and relieving anxiety.

Practising self-care with your breathing

Skills

Sometimes we ‘forget’ how to breathe, and especially at times of stress our breathing quickens as part of the fight or flight response. You can control your breathing to help your body to ‘stand down’ and feel calmer by introducing paced or diaphragmatic breathing.

- You might find it easier to start this in bed lying down or sitting upright in a chair with your feet placed on the floor and your eyes closed.
- Take a normal breath and notice what happens to your stomach. Your stomach should expand and move out when inhaling.
- Put both hands across your stomach with middle fingertips just touching each other. Take a breath in, counting to 3, and your fingertips should slightly part as your stomach expands.
- Breathe out slowly and count to 5, and your fingertips should touch again.
- Practise this every day when calm, and when you start to feel anxious it will be easier to begin paced breathing.

Addressing thoughts and behaviour takes time and commitment and lots of practice

Skills

- Once you can feel calmer, it will be easier to take notice of what is happening to your thoughts.
- Perform daily checks on yourself. It is recognised that when we label our thoughts – as in 'I feel stressed and overwhelmed' or 'my thoughts are spiralling, and I feel sick' – it can reduce the intensity of the emotion at that time.
- Take a moment to consider what you are thinking at the time. Is it overly negative? How true are the thoughts? Are you being overly critical about yourself?
- Try telling yourself 'I am doing my best in these circumstances' or 'I will get this finished a little slower today'.
- What would you say to a friend experiencing these feelings? Would you agree with their negative thoughts of incompetence and failure? You would more likely be caring and want to reassure them through this time. Practise self-care and talk to yourself as you would a close friend or relative.

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) for a wide range of psychological problems is an evidence-based and non-medical intervention to introduce coping skills and useful strategies to help manage and reduce the impact on daily life. The intervention is a practical skills-based approach and is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence for managing mild to moderate anxiety.

Contacts

OTHER SOURCES OF SUPPORT

- NHS Website on CBT
- Every Mind Matters
- NHS in Mind
- Mind

Kindly contributed by Emma Persand from Lemur Health & Working with the Menopause

All content has been written by a health care professional based on available medical evidence (sources of evidence available on request) and is for information purposes only. It does not replace professional medical advice. If you are concerned about any aspects of your health you should make an appointment to see your doctor. You should always seek medical advice before changing your treatment routine.

Get in Touch

If you have any feedback about this factsheet, please email: info@lemurhealth.com

© Lemur Health Ltd

The information within this document remains the property of Lemur Health. Therefore, any information within this document must not be disclosed or copied (in whole or in part) without written consent from and authorisation by Lemur Health.



Cognitive Behavioural Therapy