A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Based Approach

What is CBT?

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a talking therapy which can help people look at the different situations that they find themselves in, and to understand their thoughts, emotions and behaviours. The idea is that our thoughts, emotions, physical symptoms and behaviour can all influence one another and therefore help to maintain unhelpful moods such as low mood. Take a look at the diagram below.

The CBT model emphasises that it is not the situation that causes the emotional distress that an individual experiences. CBT argues that it is the individual’s interpretation or view of that event or situation which causes the emotional distress. CBT works by focussing on the negative thoughts and learning how to challenge them, as well as learning how to change unhelpful behaviours such as avoidance.
When feeling low or anxious, it is common to have negative automatic thoughts or nats. These are unhelpful thoughts that pop into our minds without any effort. With anxiety, nats are often about overestimating threat and underestimating an individual’s ability to cope, which can maintain any anxiety. Sometimes people find coping mechanisms which help them deal with the situation. This may involve avoiding the situation, or doing something differently in order to help control their anxiety. Although this may lower their anxiety in the short term, it can actually maintain and reinforce it in the long term. Breaking this vicious cycle may cause an increase in anxiety to begin with but ultimately help reduce it.

The example below is of Linda. Her situation is chairing a meeting at work. Her thoughts, emotions, physical symptoms and behaviours are all influenced by each other. She thinks that “everyone will think that I am stupid,” which contributes to her feeling embarrassed, as well as making her heart beat faster and becoming sweaty. As a result of this, she now actively avoids going to any meetings. This can cause Linda to feel even more anxious and embarrassed and strengthens her negative thoughts. If Linda thought she was able to chair the meeting, and did not avoid future meetings, this can then help create a more balanced emotion and to manage anxiety.
With low mood, people tend to think about themselves, the world and the future in a very negative way. For example, someone might have thoughts that “I am useless” and “It is pointless trying, as there is no point”. The lower a person feels, the more nats they will have and the more nats, the lower a person will feel. This forms a vicious circle that needs to be broken.

Look at the example below of Mike. Mike has been having problems at work and over the last few months has been feeling very low. His situation is that he has been asked to go to a party by an old friend. Again, notice how his thoughts, emotions, behaviour and physical sensations are all influenced by each other. He thinks negatively about the invitation and thinks that “no-one will talk to me”. As a result, he decides not to go to the party and feels even lower. If Mike had gone to the party and found that people did talk to him this may have helped him feel better and improved his low mood.
Activity

Can you think of situations where you feel anxious or low – what was the situation? What were you thinking? What did you notice in your body? How did you behave in the situation? Can you fill in your own Hot Cross Bun?

My Hot Cross Bun

Situation

Where? When? With who? What?

Emotions

What emotion(s) did I feel at that time?

Thoughts

What went through my mind at that time?

Behavior

What helped me cope?

Did I avoid anything? What automatic reactions did I have? What would other people have seen me doing?

Physical sensations

What did I notice in my body? What did I feel and where?