

Introduction to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

What is CBT?

Cognition is “*the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience and the senses*”. It is a sensation, idea or intuition. Basically, it comprises your thoughts and perceptions.

Behaviour is the way in which you conduct yourself in response to a particular situation or stimulus.

Therapy is “*treatment intended to relieve or heal a disorder*”.

It is a **psychotherapy** because it works for the psyche, or your soul, mind and spirit. It focuses on your thoughts, feelings and behaviours. It follows the theory that the way you think affects the way you feel, and the way you feel drives you to act accordingly. It is a brief, solution-focused technique, which means it is a goal-directed, collaborative approach to change.

Therefore, CBT is a type of therapy intended to relieve the thoughts and behaviours that may be causing suffering, dysfunction or problems – AKA dis-order. Addiction is a disorder, so we can use CBT to help heal from addiction.

Shakespeare wrote: “*There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*” It seems Shakespeare had an understanding of CBT. He was right. We are what we think. Addicts are notorious for negative or distorted thinking. Negative or distorted thoughts can create negative or distorted lives. CBT posits that if you change your thoughts, you can change your life.

CBT is evidence-based, which means it is a therapy supported by a lot of research and evidence which indicates that it is pretty successful. It has been researched over a long time and in many different countries all over the world. CBT has achieved much success in treating depression, anxiety and compulsive behaviours, particularly addiction.

CBT works on changing perspectives. People with addiction tend to have chronically negative or distorted perceptions.

CBT maintains that your thoughts create feelings, feelings create behaviours and behaviours then reinforce thoughts, which then create more feelings, which create further behaviours, which then reinforce more thoughts, and so on and so on. This can become a vicious cycle that never seems to end. The cycle can lead to anxiety,

depression, exhaustion, addiction and general misery for you and the people in your life.

The CBT model generally follows this simple process:

- There is a situation or triggering event, which is seen as neutral (meaning that it is just an event – it is the way we think about the event that gives it meaning).
- This neutral event then causes you to have thoughts (termed automatic cognitions). This is where things can start going awry. Your automatic thoughts are often influenced by your past experiences, your temperament, damage to your brain (can be from using) and the way you have been socialised to think – in other words, your perspective. Automatic thoughts are often distorted in the addict.
- Your thoughts, from your distorted perspective, then determine your emotions, or feelings, which are also influenced by your possibly distorted perspective, your past experiences, your temperament and your socialised accepted range of feelings, etc.
- Your feelings then elicit your responses, or what you do, ie your reactions to your thoughts and feelings. If your thoughts and feelings are distorted, then your behaviours are most likely going to be distorted, dysfunctional or maladaptive too, which often results in skewed behaviours that reinforce or even exacerbate distorted thoughts. The whole cycle becomes worse and worse or, at best, simply reinforces itself.

Addiction is a twisted response to life, created by distorted thinking and subsequent feelings, coupled with your compulsive need to use (i.e. your behaviour). This is why CBT has been proven to work well with addicts. Your distorted thoughts, feelings and behaviours make you a perfect subject!

A big part of CBT is the ability to recognise what thoughts and emotions you are experiencing, so that you can interrupt and change the cycle before you behave, according to your distorted thoughts and feelings, causing more problems. Most addicts have a very limited “emotional vocabulary”. The more specifically you can identify your exact thoughts and emotions, the more feedback and insight you can gain.

According to the CBT model, thoughts decide the reaction or response. Healthy thoughts provide for healthy responses, while unhealthy thoughts lead to unhealthy behaviours. CBT describes this as the cognition (thoughts) causing the behaviour.

In order to change or manage the way we perceive events; CBT employs a widely researched technique called **ABC**.

A represents the activating event, such as being in a challenging situation.

B represents the underlying belief, which then interprets the situation.

C represents the consequence/s (emotional and behavioural), or what you feel and do as a result of the situation and your interpretation of it.

ABC is the main tool in helping professionals and persons with unhealthy behaviour to process the thinking leading to the unhealthy, self-defeating behaviour and ultimately overcome it. (See Table 1 below for an example of how the ABC of CBT works.)

Table 1: Example of the ABC of CBT

Situation (A) Activating event	Thoughts (B) Beliefs	Emotional (C) Consequences	Behavioral (C) Consequences
My partner says the house is a mess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm not good enough • He/She is telling me to clean the house • He/She is disappointed with me • He/She doesn't like me • I'm a failure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecurity/Fear • Guilt • Sadness • Anger (at self or partner, or both) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start cleaning up the sink • Clatter dishes and slam cupboard doors • Cry • Defend myself • Start an argument

In this example, you can see the suffering I cause myself, and probably my partner, from what could have been an innocent statement of observation by my partner, without any judgement, about the house being a bit messy. Even if there was judgement with it, unless my partner says: *“Gosh, you’re so lazy! Look at the mess! Why haven’t you cleaned the house!?!”*, then I’m simply mind-reading and it’s none of my business what my partner thinks, unless I ask them specifically to tell me. And I only have to ask them, if I want to ask them. Otherwise, again, it’s none of my business, unless they tell me outright.

We’ll be going further into how to manage these situations using CBT tools in the next modules. For now, it’s important that you’re aware of, and are able to recognise, the ABC process.

Our distorted perceptions create a process like being caught in a “self-fulfilling prophecy”, where we become our own doomsday prophets. What this means is that our thinking leads us to perceptions which are largely negative and self-defeating, causing all sorts of troubled feelings and associated behaviours. These then lead us to think more gloomy or distorted thoughts.

But there is a way out – and it’s relatively simple, if you practise it. Using CBT can become a habitual practice for you, if you want your life to change.

This is a simple, non-complicated way of viewing how we see the world from our own perspective and, as a result, act accordingly. Most of the time, our judgement is skewed and we can over-react, or react inappropriately. People suffering from addiction tend to be more vulnerable to this cycle. This may be because people with the disease of addiction have problems with the frontal lobe of the brain, which manages judgement and rational components of functioning. So the cycle can be a bit more extreme for addicts — as we say, “turning the volume up”. This does not mean it is hopeless. We just have to learn how to “turn the volume down a little”.

You have to repair the damage (first by not using, one day at a time) and learn how to recover your mind and body, by using your mind and body as the treatment. Part of

that treatment is employing tools such as CBT. This helps you to “turn the volume down”, a day at a time, one event at a time, until you can manage your thoughts and emotions better, without your drug.

Learning how to PAUSE and activate conscious, rational thoughts through using CBT and body work, such as simple abstinence, mindfulness, relaxation techniques and other strategies you are learning in this course, can and does change your damaged pathways over time. There is hope, and loads of it, according to evidence-based research and fact.

The distorted thoughts, feelings and behaviour cycle will become more fragile at the spot where you have the most awareness and commitment to change. That’s why we keep asking you to become aware of your thoughts, feelings and behaviours: because awareness weakens unconscious or habitual thoughts, feelings and behaviours, so the cycle will finally snap at the weakest spot and you will be freed from its painful grip.

If you have awareness, coupled with a commitment to change, you will be able to weaken the cycle and free yourself from the bondage of this disease. Don’t worry if you’re finding it difficult to identify feelings today. As you’ve probably realised already, we ask you to identify your feelings every day during this program. This is why. One day at a time, it will become easier.

We’ll be going further into CBT and how to manage difficult or dysfunctional thoughts, feelings and behaviours in the next two modules.

Recommended videos

ABC Model of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRRdSm4ZjX4> (3:51 mins)

TED Talk: Feeling Good | David Burns.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1T5uMeYv9Q> (17:56 mins)

TED Talk: Why You Should Define Your Fears Instead of Your Goals.

https://www.ted.com/talks/tim_ferriss_why_you_should_define_your_fears_instead_of_your_goals/reading-list?referrer=playlist-goals&language=en (13:17 mins)

TED Talk: A Simple Trick to Improve Positive Thinking.

https://www.ted.com/talks/alison_ledgerwood_a_simple_trick_to_improve_positive_thinking/up-next?language=en (9:59 mins)

Reflective Questions: Introduction to CBT

Use this table to write up at **least three examples** from your life, using the ABC of CBT. You can write more if you are on a roll.

Table 2: The ABC of CBT

#	Situation (A)	Automatic thoughts (B)	Emotions (C)	Response (C)
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				