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Introduction to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) helps you identify maladaptive thought patterns and behaviours, and replace them with helpful ones. CBT helps reduce distress, improve mood, and manage anxiety, sadness, and other unpleasant emotions (feelings).

What are cognitions?

Cognitions refer to a multitude of psychological processes that help you understand your internal and external worlds and function successfully. Examples: Sensing your immediate environment, recalling something from your memory, solving a problem, thinking, making a decision, etc.

Thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

Thoughts: A thought is something that occurs in your mind. It could be an idea, an image, a question, or even a memory. A thought can be positive, negative, or neutral.

Examples of thoughts:

“I will flunk the test tomorrow”
“Why is it so cold right now?”
“This book smells old and musty”

Characteristics of thoughts:

Thoughts may seem simple and basic at first glance, but they often emerge from underlying psychological processes. Thoughts are often automatic, and they usually pass unless you choose to dwell on them. However, they can also be persistent and troublesome at times. CBT helps you observe your thoughts and investigate whether they are accurate.

Feelings: A feeling, also known as an emotion, is an internal experience that is subjective (only you can describe how you feel). Feelings (emotions) are accompanied by physical sensations, changes in how you think, and may push you to behave or act in a certain manner.

Examples of feelings (emotions): Joy, sadness, grief, anxiety, fear, disgust, contempt, shame, love, loneliness, emptiness, feeling numb, relief, etc.

Feelings often occur as a result of your reaction to a triggering external event, a thought, or a behaviour. You may also experience certain feelings inexplicably, without any reason or trigger.

Behaviours: A behaviour is an action you may take in response to a thought or feeling. You may also engage in a behaviour in response to a situation or an external factor. In simple words, a behaviour is anything that you do which can be observed by others or yourself.

Examples of behaviours:

Avoidance behaviours: Sleeping all day long, skipping work, postponing assignments.

Safety behaviours: Apologising profusely, checking if you locked the door, and taking your medicines on time.

Coping behaviours: Calling up a friend, going shopping, journaling.

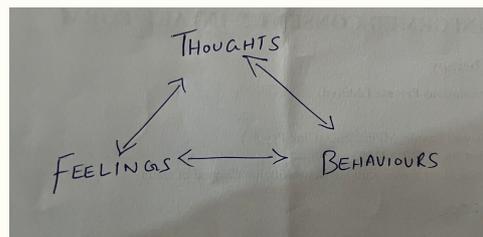
Self-destructive behaviours: Having unprotected sex, binge drinking, and cutting.

Habitual behaviours: Biting your nails, doom scrolling at night, and scratching your nose.

A behaviour can either be automatic or deliberate. Others can observe an overt behaviour, while a covert behaviour can be observed only by you. Behaviours can maintain, worsen, or improve your emotional problems. CBT helps you replace unhelpful behaviours with helpful ones.

CBT Triangle

The CBT triangle, also known as the “Cognitive Triangle,” is a symbolic representation of how your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are interrelated.



Thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are interconnected. An automatic negative thought (ANT) results in negative emotions, which can make you do things (behaviour) that aren't necessarily helpful. The resulting behaviour may leave you experiencing a negative emotion, which in turn activates negative thoughts.

Thoughts activate emotions and induce behaviours, emotions generate thoughts and cause behaviours, and behaviours result in thoughts and emotions as well.

In other words, your emotional distress is emblematic of the knotty mess that your thoughts, feelings and behaviours create for you.

CBT helps you decipher this cognitive muddle, gain clarity, and replace unhelpful thinking patterns and maladaptive behaviours with helpful ones. As a result, you will be able to manage your emotions better.