

How CBT works: a plain-language guide to cognitive behavioural therapy

101 Psychotherapy | Registered Psychotherapists | Greater Toronto Area

7 things to know about CBT therapy

1 CBT is based on the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours

The central premise: how you think about a situation affects how you feel, which affects what you do. Changing the thinking changes the loop.

2 The focus is on current patterns, not just the past

CBT works primarily with present-day thoughts and behaviours, not extensive exploration of childhood. This makes it faster and more action-oriented than some other approaches.

3 Cognitive restructuring: examining and testing thoughts

You learn to identify automatic negative thoughts, examine the evidence for and against them, and develop more accurate alternatives. This is not positive thinking, it is more rigorous than that.

4 Behavioural activation: rebuilding engagement

Especially useful for depression. Gradually reintroducing activities that provide a sense of accomplishment or pleasure, which in turn improves mood. Action first, motivation follows.

5 Exposure therapy: reducing avoidance

For anxiety and phobias, gradual, controlled exposure to feared situations reduces their power over time. Avoidance maintains anxiety; exposure extinguishes it.

6 Homework is typically part of the work

CBT involves work between sessions: thought records, behavioural experiments, practice logs. Sessions build the framework; practice applies it.

7 CBT typically runs 12 to 20 sessions

For most conditions, CBT is time-limited compared to open-ended therapy. This makes it cost-effective and suits people who want a structured, goal-focused approach.

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