



Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Its Role in Living with Post-Viral/Chronic Fatigue

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a talking therapy that can help you manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave. It's most commonly used to help manage anxiety and depression, but can also be useful for helping to manage your symptoms and any distress you may feel when suffering from post-viral fatigue syndrome (PVFS) and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS).

The practice of CBT involves looking at the way thoughts, feelings, behaviour and physical sensations are interlinked. This DOES NOT imply that PVFS/CFS is not real, just that, as for many physical conditions, there is evidence that the way we think about illness can help us to cope better.

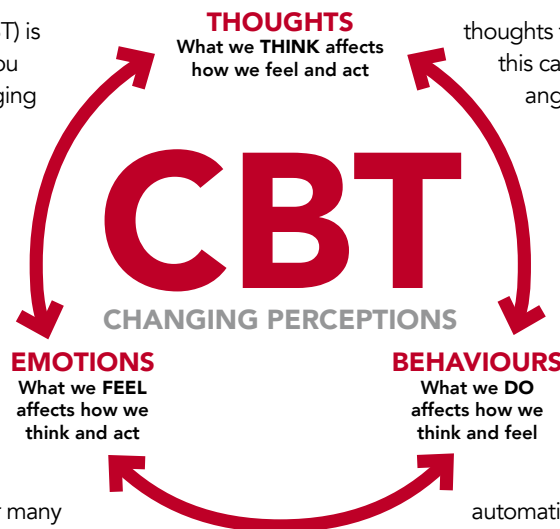
HOW CBT WORKS

Humans are very complex beings. So how we think will affect how we feel and what we do; equally what we do influences how we feel and what we think. Our thoughts, feelings and actions are always interlinked. Negative thoughts and feelings can trap you in a vicious cycle. CBT aims to help you deal with overwhelming problems in a more positive way by breaking them down into smaller parts.

CBT therapy shows you how to change these negative patterns to improve the way you feel. Unlike some other talking therapies, CBT deals with your current problems, rather than focusing on issues from your past. It looks for practical ways to improve your state of mind on a daily basis.

CBT for PVFS/CFS overlaps very much with understanding the complexity of PVFS/CFS regarding the biopsychosocial approach. It involves identifying and working on anything that may be maintaining the illness and making it harder to recover. This will usually include lifestyle factors such as "no time to rest", "boom-and-bust activity pattern" and poor sleep but for some people may include thoughts such as, "my house has to be perfect", "I always have to put other people first", "I can't say no to my kids". CBT can also help people to look at and challenge these thoughts if they want to.

Most people have a good balance between positive and negative thoughts. When we become unwell it is easy for our



thoughts to become more negative and this can make us feel more frustrated, angry and sad.

CBT aims to stop negative thought cycles by breaking down things that make you feel bad, anxious or scared. By making your problems more manageable, CBT can help you change your negative thought patterns and improve the way you feel. CBT can help you get to a point where you can achieve this on your own and tackle problems without the help of a therapist.

Negative thoughts can become automatic: the more we pay attention to them, the more they seem to pop up by themselves and can be difficult to get rid of. The first thing to remember is that our thoughts are not facts. So identifying 'automatic negative thoughts' is a good place to start.

Here are some examples:

- "I woke feeling exhausted, I must be getting worse."
- "There's no point in trying, I'll only fail."
- "I'll never get any better."
- "I am useless; I didn't achieve everything I'd planned to do."

Noticing these thoughts is the first step – many people find it helpful to jot them down.

The next step is to think about whether they are really true and, if not, to try to come up with a more balanced alternative. Here are some examples of negative thought patterns and some more balanced or helpful alternatives.

When you have a negative thought, ask yourself the questions shown in the Table overleaf. They may help you think of a more helpful thought.

CBT can help you make sense of overwhelming problems by breaking them down into smaller parts. In CBT, problems are broken down into five main areas:

- situations
- thoughts
- emotions
- physical feelings
- actions.

CBT is based on the concept of these five areas being interconnected and affecting each other. For example,

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your thoughts about a certain situation can often affect how you feel both physically and emotionally, as well as how you act in response.

PROS AND CONS OF CBT

CBT is not a cure for PVFS/CFS but it may help you manage their symptoms, improve their functioning and reduce the distress associated with having a chronic illness. It may not be successful or suitable for everyone.

Some of the advantages of CBT include the following:

- It may be helpful in cases where medicine alone will not work.
- It can be completed in a relatively short period of time compared with other talking therapies.
- The highly structured nature of CBT means it can be provided in different formats, including in groups, self-help books and apps, or via virtual/telehealth calls (ideal if you're living in lockdown and/or social distancing situations).
- It teaches you useful and practical strategies that can be used in everyday life, even after the sessions have finished.

Some of the challenges with CBT include the following:

- You need to commit yourself to the process to get the most from it – a therapist can help and advise you, but they need your co-operation.
- Attending regular CBT sessions and carrying out any extra work between sessions can take up a lot of your time.
- It may not be suitable for people with more complex mental health needs or learning difficulties, as it requires structured sessions.
- It involves confronting your emotions and anxieties – you may

experience initial periods where you're anxious or emotionally uncomfortable.

- It focuses on the person's capacity to change themselves (their thoughts, feelings and behaviours) – this does not address any wider problems in systems or families that often have a significant impact on someone's health and wellbeing.

HOW CBT IS DIFFERENT

CBT differs from many other psychotherapies because it's:

- pragmatic – it helps identify specific problems and tries to solve them;
- highly structured – rather than talking freely about your life, you and your therapist discuss specific problems and set goals for you to achieve;
- focused on current problems – it's mainly concerned with how you think and act now rather than attempting to resolve past issues; and
- collaborative – your therapist will not tell you what to do; they'll work with you to find solutions to your current difficulties.

CBT SESSIONS

CBT can be carried out with a therapist in 1-to-1 sessions or in groups with other people in a similar situation to you. You usually meet with a CBT therapist for between 5 and 20 weekly or fortnightly sessions, with each session lasting 30 to 60 minutes

Seeing a therapist within the PVFS/CFS team will help you to identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts and could be hugely beneficial in managing and progressing with your condition. One of the biggest benefits of CBT is that after your course has finished, you can continue to apply the principles learned to your daily life. This should make it less likely that you have relapses and setbacks.

 Negative Thought	 Ask Yourself This Question	 Identify a More Positive Thought
There's so much to do, I'm not getting anywhere, and it's not working!	Am I forgetting the good things – no matter how small?	But what about all the things I have done? I must not forget them. They still count. Small steps ... I have made some progress.
Everyone is fed up with me!	Am I reading into other people's minds?	How do I know that? They haven't said they are fed up with me. They may just be too busy to talk to me at the moment. They may have other things on their mind, or maybe they are feeling fed up for some other reason.
I feel so ill. I know I will have a relapse and be worse rather than better.	Am I thinking the worst?	I'm thinking of the worst possible outcome! It doesn't have to end in disaster! I may not get worse. If I do it might not be that bad, or I might even feel better.
I can't help with the housework because I'm so tired. I'm just useless!	Am I labelling myself (or others)?	I might not be able to do much housework right now, but that doesn't mean that I always have been and always will be 'useless' in every situation. In fact there are ways that I can be helpful, even if I can't do very much physically. Not everyone is perfect all the time.

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