What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy? Does It Help People Who Worry?

Ravinder Mamtani, MD
Professor of Public Health
Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar

We all worry and get scared from time to time. Some fears are normal, but if you feel anxious or worry most of the time and have unfounded fears, then it is time to seek medical advice.

Before getting to cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), let’s first talk about various types of mind/body approaches that are helpful in reducing anxiety and stress levels.

According to James Manktelow, author of several books on managing stress, there are essentially three types of mind/body approaches that could be helpful in situations of anxiety and stress. These are a) action-based approaches b) emotionally-based approaches, and c) acceptance-oriented interventions. In action-based approaches, we have the ability to change factors that contribute to stress, or engage in meditation and other such relaxation techniques to lessen the effects of stress. Many job-related and other day-to-day stresses can be handled by this approach.

In the emotionally-based approach, we do not have the power to modify the circumstances surrounding the situation; but we can still change our interpretations and perceptions about the situation. CBT, a commonly used technique, belongs to this group of mind/body techniques.

Finally, if we have neither the power to change the situation nor the ability to change our perception about it, the only option that remains is finding ways and means to survive the stress. This is an acceptance-oriented strategy.

A Closer Look at CBT

Cognitive behavior therapy is an effective treatment for dealing with negative and self-defeating thoughts for which there is no rational basis. In this type of approach, the idea is to assess the rationality and validity of our interpretations (or perceptions) about negative thoughts associated with a certain situation or event. When we discover that there is no validity and truth to them, it changes the way we think about them. This in turn, results in positive thoughts and optimistic mood.

Negative and irrational thoughts and feelings can cause unnecessary anxiety and depression. Also, such thoughts have the potential of magnifying the intensity of symptoms such as pain, anxiety and emotional discomfort commonly encountered in chronic illnesses such as cancer, musculoskeletal disorders and other debilitating conditions. CBT can be helpful with these conditions.

So how is cognitive therapy done? Many techniques and methods can be used to perform cognitive therapy. One example of cognitive therapy is provided below.

The initial step is to recognize the stress and the negative thoughts associated with it. For example a person with an illness may have a negative thought of becoming “disabled,” or “losing independence,” and so on. This may result in the person experiencing moods such as frustration, anger and insecurity. The next step is to ask patients to consider questions concerning their negative thoughts. Examples of such questions might include “Is this really true? Am I jumping to
conclusions? Are there other effective treatments I should consider? What is the evidence that I will not recover?”

It is very important to help patients identify the evidence that does not support their negative thinking. Finally patients are encouraged to develop balanced and rational thoughts about their particular situation. This results in positive thoughts and an improved mood.

CBT helps us to pause, reflect and accurately assess the situation we might be experiencing. It helps us to appraise what lies behind negative thoughts. This technique helps in understanding reasons for stress that, in turn, can cause physical symptoms and anxiety. Cognitive therapy, when indicated and properly administered, can reduce anxiety and emotional suffering.

Consulting your doctor or a licensed mental health care professional and undergoing an evaluation to arrive at a proper diagnosis is imperative. Once this has been done, the next step should be to assess various treatment options available to you. Medications can be helpful, but there are also non-pharmacological mind/body options. Cognitive therapy offers one such effective option. You and your doctor should discuss the benefits, limitations and risks of each option, and then decide on one or the combination to use for your specific disorder.

*The medical information in this article is provided as an information resource only, and is not to be used or relied on for any diagnostic or treatment purposes. This information is not intended to be patient education, does not create any patient-physician relationship, and should not be used as a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment. If you have or suspect that you have a medical problem or condition, please contact your physician.*

© Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar