

CBT for Anxiety



We all feel afraid and worried from time to time – after all, fear is an emotion that aims to protect us from anticipated danger. When we experience fear but we are not facing any real danger, we call this anxiety.

For some of us, the anxiety symptoms may become more frequent or severe to the point that they affect our ability to work, study, socialise, or live our daily lives.

Psychological therapy is the treatment of choice for anxiety disorders. You might have come across phrases such as “best practice”, “evidence-based treatment”, or “evidence-supported therapy”. These all refer to a particular type of treatment or therapy that has been repeatedly and extensively evaluated and found to be effective. One evidence-based treatment for anxiety is cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). CBT is a combination of both cognitive therapy and behaviour therapy. CBT helps individuals develop a variety of strategies to manage their thinking and behaviour in order to reduce and better manage their anxiety symptoms. Anxiety is also often treated with medication, and is often paired with psychological therapy. Please see your medical doctor or psychiatrist for more information about medical treatments.

Cognitive Therapy

When people are anxious, they often worry that something bad will happen (e.g., “I won’t pass the exam and will have to drop out”, “I’m going to have a heart attack”, or “People will think I’m stupid”). They also tend to believe that they would not be able to cope with these negative outcomes and this can further increase the anxiety experienced. Sometimes, people may also start to perceive the anxiety itself as dangerous. Much of the time, these negative predictions are not accurate – the feared outcomes either do not happen, or if they do, they are not as catastrophic as initially predicted.

The aim of cognitive therapy is to help individuals realise that they can influence their feelings by identifying and changing their thoughts and beliefs. Cognitive therapy focuses on discovering and challenging unhelpful assumptions and beliefs, and developing more helpful and balanced thoughts.



Behaviour Therapy

People who are anxious also tend to act in certain ways because of their anxiety. The fear response includes a strong fight/flight/freeze response, and the urge to escape or avoid potentially dangerous situations is very strong.

People with problematic anxiety might behave in certain ways, like avoiding potential triggers, with the intention of reducing their anxiety. However, these behaviours can often backfire and keep anxiety going. For example, someone might start to avoid shopping centres due to anxiety. While this avoidance brings initial relief, the person is likely to feel even more anxious the next time they have to visit a shopping centre, or go somewhere that is similarly busy. They also miss out on opportunities to learn that what they are concerned about doesn’t happen, or that they can cope. Over time, this avoidance can extend to other public places and can leave people feeling anxious about almost anywhere outside of their house. Because the consequences of avoidance can often become new triggers of anxiety, people often describe being trapped in a “vicious cycle of anxiety” (please see [“The Vicious Cycle of Anxiety”](#) handout for more info).

Behaviour therapy aims to identify and change aspects of behaviour that may worsen anxiety or keep it going, including avoidance behaviours. Often, this involves confronting the feared situations or the physical sensations of anxiety that one may have previously avoided – this method is known as exposure (therapy). This is usually done in a gradual and controlled manner, so that we can learn to tolerate our anxiety, and collect evidence about the actual danger involved in the situation.



CBT or Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

CBT combines effective components of cognitive and behaviour therapies into one unified treatment package. Behavioural experiments are an example of a common and effective technique used in CBT. These experiments involve going into feared situations to test our predictions about those situations. Through this process, behavioural experiments provide us with opportunities to drop our avoidance behaviours and collect evidence for or against our initial anxious thoughts. This new information then helps us to approach future situations with more accurate, realistic and less anxiety-provoking expectations.

Other strategies that you may find in CBT programs for anxiety management include attention training, breathing retraining, and structured problem-solving. While confronting feared situations can be challenging and feel uncomfortable in the short-term, through CBT, we can develop coping skills to manage and tolerate our anxiety more effectively, and build our confidence in handling these situations in future.