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Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): A Practical Guide

What Is CBT?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is an evidence-based form of counseling that focuses on the connection between **thoughts, feelings, and behaviors**. CBT helps you identify unhelpful thinking patterns, understand how they affect your emotions and actions, and develop healthier ways of responding to life's challenges.

CBT is:

- Structured and goal-oriented
- Focused on the present (while honoring past experiences)
- Practical and skill-based
- Collaborative—you and your therapist work as a team

The CBT Triangle

CBT is based on the idea that three parts of our experience are connected:

- **Thoughts** – What we tell ourselves
- **Feelings** – Emotional reactions
- **Behaviors** – What we do (or avoid)

A change in **one area** can positively impact the others.

Example:

- Thought: "I'm going to fail."
- Feeling: Anxiety, discouragement
- Behavior: Avoiding the task

CBT helps you interrupt this cycle and create healthier patterns.

What CBT Helps With

CBT is effective for many concerns, including:

- Anxiety and worry
- Depression
- Stress and burnout
- Low self-esteem
- Trauma-related symptoms
- Relationship difficulties
- Life transitions and decision-making

Common Unhelpful Thinking Patterns

CBT helps identify cognitive distortions such as:

- **All-or-Nothing Thinking** ("If I'm not perfect, I've failed.")
- **Catastrophizing** ("This will be a disaster.")
- **Mind-Reading** ("They must think I'm incompetent.")
- **Should Statements** ("I should always be able to handle this.")
- **Magnification/Minimization** (Blowing things out of proportion or dismissing positives)

Key CBT Skills You'll Learn

In CBT, you'll practice skills such as:

- Identifying automatic thoughts
- Challenging unhelpful beliefs
- Replacing negative thoughts with balanced, realistic ones
- Learning coping strategies for stress and anxiety
- Improving problem-solving and decision-making
- Practicing emotional regulation and self-compassion

What Sessions May Look Like

CBT sessions often include:

- Setting goals together
- Reviewing recent situations or stressors
- Learning and practicing new skills
- Using worksheets or reflection exercises
- Applying skills between sessions (home practice)

Progress happens through **practice**, not perfection.

Why CBT Works

CBT empowers you to:

- Understand your inner dialogue
- Gain a sense of control over emotional reactions
- Respond to challenges with clarity and confidence
- Build long-term skills you can use independently

A Final Thought

CBT is not about “positive thinking” or ignoring difficult emotions. It’s about learning to think **accurately**, respond **intentionally**, and act in ways that support your values and well-being.