

Anxiety & Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Module

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Steps in Management of Anxiety

Step One in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: “Triggers”

How to identify triggers that cause anxiety

- **Step One** - problem thoughts that cause anxious feelings and anxious behavior must be identified; we might call these “triggers” and identification of those triggers must be the starting point; think of thoughts as “closed captioning” for a movie; the mind is always running thoughts often several at once; you may not know it but some of those thoughts are causing anxiety; knowing what those thoughts are before they take control of feelings and behavior is the first step in CBT Cognitive Behavioral Therapy;
- This step can require careful thought: for example if the thought of leaving the house to go outside is causing anxiety that fear of leaving the house is probably not what you are really anxious about;
- Sure the thought of leaving the house can be a trigger for anxiety but stop and ask yourself why? We have two goals to accomplish here:
- One- is to understand what you are really afraid of in leaving the house so we can examine more carefully at the “fear behind the fear”;
- Two- We want to stop and think long enough to interrupt the anxiety trigger from sending you into an anxiety attack;

Step Two in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: “Reality Testing”

How to use reality testing to control anxiety

- **Step Two** - “reality testing” those thoughts is the next step; reality testing is asking yourself out loud if necessary or on paper in a journal- are those anxious thoughts real?
- If we take the fear of leaving the house and going out at “face value” as if it were the reason we are afraid then we would ask ourselves (reality test):
- If I go outside will something really bad happen to me?
- Has anything bad happened to me before when I left the house?
- What is the worst thing that could happen to me if I leave the house?
- Once we reality test those fears we have to then ask ourselves about the fear behind the fear, in other words what are we really afraid of
- What am I really anxious about, I can’t really be anxious about just leaving the house;
- The answer almost always is some fear about yourself such as
- Is the fear that people won’t like you?
- Is it the fear that you won’t perform at your job?
- Is it the fear that you are in some way not good enough?
- These the types of fears are often the “behind the scenes” fears that prompt a “superficial” trigger thought such as fear of leaving the house;

Step Three in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: Redirection

Redirection: A Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Core Tool

- **Step Three:** Think of anxiety and panic attacks as a pattern, a vicious cycle, a domino effect that for you is the almost always the same vicious cycle; each anxiety sufferer has typical anxious thoughts that trigger an anxious thought into becoming an anxiety attack or panic attack;
- Once it starts the cycle proceeds quickly through all the stages
- You start having some anxious thought and then you end up feeling anxiety and then have some behavioral symptom- rapid heart and breathing, sweating,

overeating, not eating, cleaning binges, hand washing, indigestion, whatever the behavioral symptoms are for you;

- There are several common behavioral outcomes to anxiety; one group of anxious people have primarily physiological manifestations of anxiety in the form of rapid breathing and heart rate, sweating, fear of impending doom; another group of anxious people have OCD Obsessive Compulsive Symptoms with rituals and repetitive behaviors; another group of anxious people have eating disorders
- Remember that the mind has three overlapping circles of functioning- thought, emotion, and behavior and each circle or functional domain can control the others;
- Redirection: in this step you must interrupt the anxious thoughts which are the first part of the anxiety cycle which cause (anxious) emotions which will then cause (anxious) behavior; when the anxious thoughts take command of emotions and behavior you have an anxiety or panic attack in process;
- So: once you stop at the anxious thought and reality test it so that it won't automatically advance to overwhelming anxiety and behavioral symptoms you now want to actually use the following (redirecting) thought- I need to do something right away to stop myself from thinking and feeling this way so I will "do" something else right away meaning that-
- You are going to use behavior to manage anxious thoughts and anxious emotions by Redirecting; so what exactly is Redirection and how do you just interrupt anxious thoughts; you stop what you are doing and move to another place from where the anxious thoughts started and do something preferably physical; if you were sitting reading a book when the anxious thoughts started get up and for example water the plants or take the dog out for a walk; in other words, change location and change activity; this will take practice;
- How and why redirection works- this involves learning theory; you see, your brain has learned that when you have anxious thoughts that those take over the domains of emotion and behavior; and it all just happens in sequence and automatically; redirection is not teaching you that walking the dog is better than anxious thoughts (although it is); rather, redirection is teaching your brain that it is possible to interrupt the cycle and that anxious thoughts do not automatically lead to anxious emotions and anxious behavior (rapid breathing, heart

pounding, sweating, eating too much or not eating at all or whatever your anxious behavior is); the learning theory is that of conditioning and deconditioning namely that you can “unlearn” that anxious thoughts automatically lead to an anxiety or panic attacks; as you practice interrupting anxious thoughts you no longer have “anticipatory anxiety” in which once you start thinking about things that make you anxious you expect to be anxious or have a panic attack;

- If you can learn you can unlearn
- Pavlov’s dog: remember that Pavlov “taught” his dog to expect that when he rang a bell along with presenting the dog with his food that the dog would start salivating when he paired the bell sound along with the food; then he showed that the dog would salivate to just the sound of the bell without the food; but as time went on if he just rang the bell without presenting the food, the dog at first would salivate; but then after some time the bell would no longer cause the dog to salivate in expectation of food; the dog “unlearned” or was deconditioned to the sound of the bell;
- So you “teach” your emotions and behavior to not automatically respond to anxious thoughts with redirection; the more you interrupt the domino effect of cascading from anxious thought to anxious emotion to anxious behavior the more you “unlearn” or learn to ignore the anxious thoughts;

Overly short summary:

- Identify anxiety thoughts=triggers; know what they are so you can recognize them as soon as they arise
- Interrupt anxiety thoughts
- Reality test anxiety thoughts
- Redirect anxiety thoughts to physically demanding behaviors

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Summarized

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy teaches:

Summary: When either the emotional or behavioral domains dominate the other two domains (emotions controlling thought or behavior - or behavior controlling emotions or thought) there are problems with self-management; when either emotion or behavior are in control, thought- with its subset features of analysis, executive decision making, judgment, and planning- is pushed into the background, instead thought must come first in the managing the difficult matters of our lives; CBT Cognitive Behavioral Therapy uses thought “tools” for management of behavioral and emotional problems.