



## ASK THE EXPERT

**Question:** *What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?*

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Although it is quite a bit more complicated than this, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is just as it sounds: psychological therapy that focuses on cognitions (thoughts) and behaviors. The basic principle of CBT is that what a person believes affects his or her emotions and behavior. CBT focuses on the inter-relationships between cognitions, actions (behaviors), and feelings (affect) and the role they play in a person's symptoms, functioning and quality of life. By focusing on these three components, changes can be made in how a person thinks, acts and feels about his or her difficulties.

Research studies have shown that CBT is an effective treatment for a wide range of psychological illnesses and symptoms including panic disorder, depression, generalized anxiety disorder, simple phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social phobia, posttraumatic stress disorder, and agoraphobia. Cognitive behavioral therapy is helpful in helping couples with relationship problems including some types of sexual dysfunction. CBT also emphasizes stress management and relaxation techniques, as well as anger management skills. Certain medical conditions have also been shown to benefit from CBT, including migraine and tension headaches, chronic pain, irritable bowel syndrome, hypertension and TMJ.

Individual CBT is typically brief (6-20 sessions) and highly goal oriented. The relationship between the individual and the therapist is collaborative in that they both work together to identify maladaptive thought and behavior patterns and to develop a new set of healthy cognitions and effective coping skills. This is accomplished by a variety of techniques including self-monitoring, questioning, self-disclosure, education, role playing, modeling, exposure to feared or avoided situations, stress management/relaxation training, and homework assignments.

CBT employs a number of tools and skills for managing and changing thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, but the most important aspect of treatment is the relationship between the therapist and patient. CBT emphasizes an active and open relationship between therapist and patient.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is not a cure for functional gastrointestinal disorders, but the tools and skills developed during therapy can dramatically reduce the stress of coping with a chronic condition. As stress decreases, symptoms often improve because of the reduced physical activation that can make symptoms worse. CBT helps to shift functional GI symptoms to the background, so that patients can experience decreased depression, reduced anxiety, and improved quality of life.