

Understanding CBT

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) helps us understand how thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and behaviors influence one another.

What Is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)?

CBT is an evidence-based form of psychotherapy. It focuses on the relationship between what we think, how we feel emotionally and physically, and what we do. These parts of an experience can affect one another, so changing one part of the pattern can sometimes create change in the others.

How Does CBT Work?

CBT recognizes that situations do not always determine how we feel. The meaning we give a situation also matters. Two people can experience the same event and respond differently because they interpret it differently.

What Do You Learn in CBT?

CBT teaches you to slow down and notice patterns that may normally happen automatically. You can learn to identify thoughts, evaluate whether they are accurate or useful, understand how thoughts connect with emotions and behavior, and practice responses that are more helpful.

CBT Is More Than Positive Thinking

CBT is not about forcing yourself to think positively or pretending that difficult experiences are not real. The goal is to examine your thinking carefully and develop perspectives that are more balanced, accurate, flexible, and useful.

A Simple CBT Example

Situation: A friend does not respond to your text. Automatic thought: "They must be upset with me." Emotion: anxious. Body: tight chest or tense muscles. Behavior: repeatedly checking the phone or sending another message. A more balanced thought might be: "I do not know why they have not replied. They may be busy." A different interpretation can change the emotional and behavioral response.

Thoughts and Beliefs in CBT

CBT often looks at thinking at three levels: automatic thoughts, intermediate beliefs, and core beliefs. The levels are related, but they are not the same.

AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

Immediate thoughts or mental images

Automatic thoughts are the words, ideas, predictions, memories, or images that quickly enter the mind in a particular situation. They can happen so rapidly that we notice the emotion before we notice the thought. They may be accurate, partly accurate, or distorted.

Examples

- "I'm going to mess this up."
- "She thinks I'm incompetent."
- "Something bad is going to happen."
- "I can't handle this."
- "They are ignoring me on purpose."

INTERMEDIATE BELIEFS

Rules, attitudes, and assumptions

Intermediate beliefs are the rules and assumptions we use to guide ourselves through life. They often develop from deeper beliefs and influence how we interpret everyday situations. They frequently appear as "should," "must," or "If ... then ..." statements.

Examples

- "I must do things perfectly."
- "I should never disappoint anyone."
- "If I ask for help, people will think I'm weak."
- "If someone is upset with me, I have done something wrong."
- "I must stay in control."

CORE BELIEFS

Deep and broad beliefs

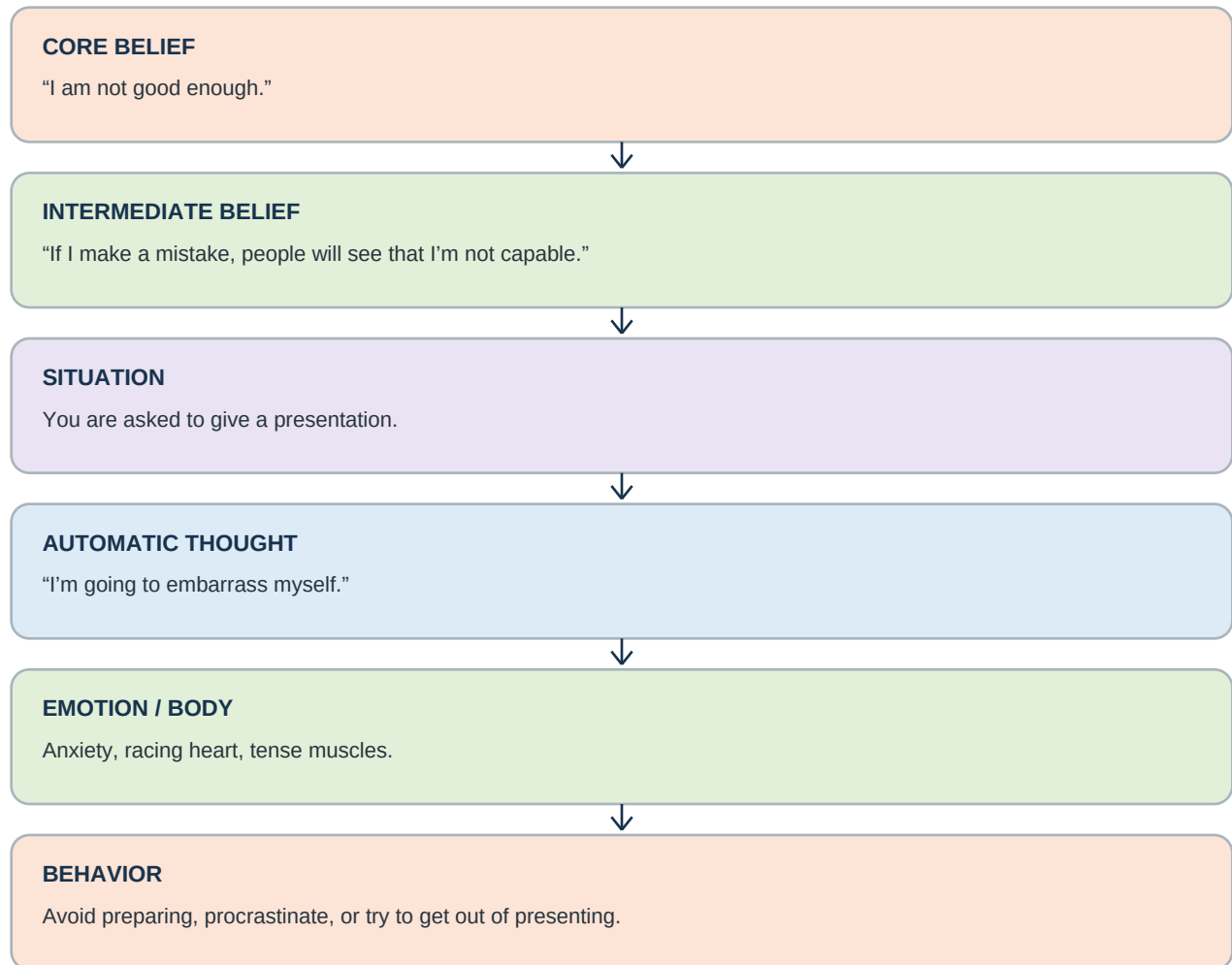
Core beliefs are deeply held conclusions about ourselves, other people, or the world. They can feel like facts because they may have been held for a long time. When a core belief is activated, we may notice information that seems to support it and overlook information that does not.

Examples

- About self: "I am not good enough."
- About self: "I am unlovable."
- About others: "People cannot be trusted."
- About the world: "The world is unsafe."
- About self: "I am powerless."

How the Levels Connect

A specific situation can activate deeper beliefs. Those beliefs can shape the assumptions we make and the automatic thoughts that appear in the moment.



Another Example

Core belief: “People will leave me.” Intermediate belief: “If someone cares about me, they should respond quickly.” Situation: A text goes unanswered. Automatic thought: “They don’t care about me anymore.” Possible response: sadness or anxiety, repeated checking, reassurance seeking, or withdrawing.

Apply the CBT Model

Choose one recent situation. Start with what happened, then work downward from your immediate thoughts to the beliefs that may be influencing them.

1. Situation

What happened? Describe the event as objectively as possible.

2. Automatic Thought

What words, prediction, meaning, memory, or image popped into your mind?

3. Emotions and Body Sensations

What emotions did you notice? What happened in your body?
You may rate emotion intensity from 0-100%.

4. Behaviors / Actions

What did you do, avoid, or feel an urge to do?

5. Possible Intermediate Belief

Is there a rule, expectation, "should/must," or "If ... then ..." assumption underneath the automatic thought?

6. Possible Core Belief

Does the pattern suggest a broader belief about yourself, other people, or the world?

Examine the Pattern

Use these questions to look at the thought or belief with curiosity rather than automatically accepting it as fact.

What evidence supports this thought or belief?

What evidence does not support it, or suggests another explanation?

Am I treating an assumption, prediction, or feeling as if it were a fact?

What would I say to someone I care about if they had this same thought?

What is a more balanced or flexible way of viewing the situation?

What is one helpful action I could take based on the more balanced perspective?