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- » Understanding your personal events
- » Putting problems into an A-B-C format

Chapter 1

Exploring the Basics of CBT

Usually people respond to negative, difficult, or downright bad life events with negative emotions such as sadness or anger (to name but two). It is both natural and normal to feel distressed when bad things happen. The degree of distress you feel depends partly on the severity of the bad event. But the key word here is *partly*. Often the meanings you attach to given events can take a bad situation and make it worse. The way you *think* about aspects of your current life or past experiences can move you from healthy, normal distress to more problematic psychological disturbance. Feelings of depression, anxiety, rage, or guilt, for example, are painful and can lead to further difficulties in your life.

Fortunately, the situation's not all doom and gloom! You can learn to recognize how your thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes impact your feelings. When you understand this principle, you can work on changing your thinking and behavior to help you take bad situations and make them better.

In this chapter, we introduce the main theoretical stuff you need to know about cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to get you started.

Understanding the Nuts and Bolts of CBT

As the name implies, CBT is a form of psychotherapy that focuses on *cognition* (thoughts) and *behavior* (actions). One way of summing up CBT is to say, “You feel the way you think.” But CBT also looks closely at behavior, because the way you act is often determined by how you feel. Furthermore, the way you act can have either a positive influence or a negative influence on your feelings. Without necessarily realizing it, you may be acting in ways that are actually fueling your bad feelings.

The interaction between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors is at the core of CBT. Therefore, CBT looks closely at how you think and act in order to help you overcome both behavioral and emotional difficulties.

Blinding you with the science of CBT

CBT practitioners are interested not only in helping people *feel* better in the short term but also in using scientifically proven strategies to help people *get* better and stay better in the long term. CBT has been tested and developed through many scientific studies, far more than any other form of psychotherapy. Because of CBT’s scientific basis, it invites you to take a more scientific approach to both understanding and resolving your problems.

A big component of CBT involves helping people become their own therapists through the continued practice of specific techniques. This self-directed element is probably one of the reasons people who have had CBT relapse less frequently than those treated using other psychotherapeutic approaches or medications without CBT.

This is a good place to clarify a few terms. Like many professions, psychology and psychotherapy use a lot of jargon. Sometimes in this book we use weird words, and other times we use more everyday words but *weirdly*. The following definitions help to make your reading more straightforward:

- » **Cognitive:** Refers to your thoughts, beliefs, memories, images, as well as your focus of attention, problem-solving, and other activities you carry out in your mind.
- » **Behavior:** Includes everything that you do and all the things you choose *not* to do, such as avoiding situations or sulking instead of speaking.
- » **Therapy:** Describes a method of treating a problem, whether physical, mental, or emotional. We use it mainly to refer to *talking therapies* such as CBT and other types of psychotherapy.
- » **Belief:** Refers to your personal thinking styles and your way of understanding the world and your experiences. In CBT, we are interested not only in what you think or believe, but in how strongly you hold a belief (often measured on a scale from 0 to 100 percent).
- » **Rules and assumptions:** Your personal rules, codes, and attitudes.
- » **Consequence:** The result or outcome of an event of some kind. In this book, we mainly refer to behavior and emotional consequences (basically the kind of results produced by ways of acting or from specific emotions).

- » **Emotion:** CBT can help people with emotional problems like anxiety, depression, shame, guilt, disgust, anger, jealousy, and envy.
- » **Experiment:** No, we're not talking about test tubes and chemistry. What we mean are exercises that you devise and try out to see what sort of effect they have on your emotional problems.
- » **Exposure:** Action on your part to expose yourself to feared or avoided situations in order to help yourself recover from your problems. Note that we're not referring to the kind of exposure that could get you arrested!
- » **Healthy:** Refers to appropriate and constructive behavior, thoughts, or emotions.
- » **Unhealthy:** Refers to extreme and destructive behavior, thoughts, or emotions.



REMEMBER

It has long been a challenge to find the right language for helpful versus unhelpful thinking. The psychological literature is full of terms like *dysfunctional assumptions*, *irrational beliefs*, and *negative automatic thoughts*. The purpose of labeling extreme meanings or inflexible thinking about yourself, the world, and others is to help you step back and perhaps consider whether there may be a more helpful alternative perspective or meaning. Choose term you prefer — the purpose is aimed at supporting growth, health, and healing, not judgment.

Linking thinking and feeling

You may generally conclude that if something happens to you, such as your car breaking down, it's the actual event that makes you feel angry or anxious. Makes sense, right? Well, not entirely. According to CBT, what determines the quality and intensity of the emotion you experience are your *thoughts* about the event.

So, although events contribute to your emotional and behavioral reactions (sometimes significantly), the meaning you give to events can greatly influence the way you feel.



REMEMBER

The more negative the event, the more distressed you probably feel. So, if you lose your job, get mugged, or are involved in a serious accident, you're very likely to feel intensely distressed. Intense distressed feelings in response to very negative events are still considered healthy because they're appropriate to the experience. Keeping your thinking and behavior patterns healthy helps you cope with even the most challenging life situations without developing extreme protracted and disturbing emotional problems.

Attaching meaning to events

Positive events normally lead to positive emotions and negative events to negative emotions. But the personal meanings you assign to events in your life sometimes may lead to unhealthy and problematic emotional reactions. Sometimes your thinking can lead you to attach extreme meanings to relatively minor events. For example, you may decide that your partner working late means that they're about to leave you for someone else. Some of the meanings that you give to events may be unrealistic, inaccurate, and fundamentally unhelpful.

When you attach a faulty meaning to an event, you're very likely to experience an unhealthy negative emotion, such as extreme guilt, as Coral does in the following example. However,

when Coral attaches a fair and accurate meaning to the event, she experiences the healthy negative emotion of intense disappointment.

We also use the words *distressed* and *disturbed* to refer to healthy and unhealthy negative emotions.

- » **Unhealthy:** Inaccurate or rigid ways of thinking about events that lead you to experience extreme unhealthy negative emotions
- » **Healthy:** Accurate and balanced ways of thinking about events that lead you to experience appropriate healthy negative emotions

The difference between distress and disturbance is in the *quality* of the emotion you experience. This is an important concept that we go over more fully in Chapter 7:



Coral was putting her young children to bed, but they just wouldn’t settle down. After several minutes of trying to get them to sleep, she lost her temper, shouted, and threw a stuffed animal across the room. Table 1-1 shows the unhealthy meaning that Coral gave the event.

TABLE 1-1 Coral’s Unhealthy Personal Meaning Page

Event:	Losing my temper with my children
Personal meaning:	I should never <i>get</i> that angry around the kids. This means that I’m a terrible mother
Emotion:	Guilt

The extreme meaning Coral attaches to her loss of temper leads her to feel guilty. Guilt is likely to feed further *self-downing* (extreme self-criticism or putting yourself down on the basis of your actions) and is unlikely to help Coral make it up to her kids. Table 1-2 shows a healthier evaluation.



In Chapter 14, we discuss the healthy alternative to self-downing, which is self-acceptance.

TABLE 1-2 Coral’s Healthy Personal Meaning Page

Event:	Losing my temper with my children
Personal meaning:	I wish I hadn’t gotten so angry with the kids. This means that I did a bad thing, but I’m still a pretty good mom overall
Emotion:	Disappointment

Because Coral attaches an appropriate and fair meaning to her temper tantrum, she experiences a healthy negative emotion. Disappointment helps Coral to condemn her *behavior* but not *herself* as a mother. She may now look more closely at her beliefs that led her to become so angry in the first place and make some changes.

Take a recent event from your own life in which you got yourself into a unhealthy emotional state. Use the Personal Meaning Page in Worksheet 1-1 to reassign a different meaning to the event and see if you can end up feeling a healthier emotion. Try to think differently about the event. Perhaps the personal meaning you're giving the event is overly negative and extreme. Try taking a more compassionate and objective view of yourself within the context of the negative event.



TIP

You may find it useful to use these questions as a guide to filling out the worksheet:

- » What happened? What did you or someone else do? Record this as the event.
- » What does the event mean about you? About other people? The world or life conditions? This is your personal meaning.
- » How do you feel inside? Record your emotion.
- » Is your personal meaning accurate, fair, and balanced? Or is it inaccurate, biased, and rigid?
- » In order to be distressed about the event instead of disturbed, what new meaning could you give to the event?

You can use two pages as we did in Coral's case if you want to see a clear distinction between your personal meanings. If you're having trouble coming up with words for your feelings, take a look at Chapter 6, which covers emotions in depth.

WORKSHEET 1-1 My Personal Meaning Page

Event:

Personal meaning:

Emotion:

Checking How CBT Can Work for You

CBT is growing in popularity as an effective treatment for a host of common psychological problems. A lot of research into CBT has focused on its use for the treatment of anxiety and depression in particular, and the results are encouraging. More and more doctors are recommending CBT because research shows that it helps people to stay well longer.

CBT is used to treat a wide range of psychological problems. Chances are, whatever emotional or behavioral problem you're experiencing, this workbook can help get you going in the right direction. Worksheet 1-2 offers a checklist of some of the problems you may experience that CBT can help you to overcome.



REMEMBER

Even if you think that your problems are too severe for a self-help book like this one to be enough, CBT may still work for you. You may benefit most from seeing a therapist who can offer additional support and guidance. Chapter 19 offers lots of advice on working with a therapist.

WORKSHEET 1-2 Problem Clarification Checklist

-
- ☐ Anger problems
 - ☐ Anorexia
 - ☐ Binge eating or overeating
 - ☐ Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)
 - ☐ Bulimia
 - ☐ Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS)
 - ☐ Chronic pain
 - ☐ Depression
 - ☐ Excessive use of nonprescription drugs and/or alcohol
 - ☐ Feelings of low self-worth
 - ☐ Gambling
 - ☐ Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
 - ☐ Ongoing feelings of guilt or shame
 - ☐ Panic attacks
 - ☐ Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
 - ☐ Procrastination
 - ☐ Social anxiety disorder (social phobia)
 - ☐ Specific phobias
 - ☐ Spending excessive amounts of money
 - ☐ Worrying all the time
-



REMEMBER

Don't be alarmed if you've checked two, three, or more items on the list; problems often overlap. In fact, having more than one problem at a time is the norm, not the exception. An example of problem overlap is depression and anxiety — people frequently experience both at the same time. You can also make yourself feel guilty about your depression or ashamed about your social phobia, depending on what meanings you give to your original problems. CBT calls this overlap of two or more problems a *meta-emotional problem* or a *secondary emotional problem*. Luckily, the strategies that you use to work on your primary problem usually work on your secondary ones, too. So take heart.

Ranking your problems

Taking stock of the areas of your life you want to target for change before you get started can be useful. Your doctor may have given you a diagnosis, or you may not be clear about what your problem actually is.

Putting your problems down on paper can help you see how they may be interacting with each other. Writing them down also gives you a clearer starting point for overcoming them. Sometimes problems don't fall into neat and tidy categories or they overlap somewhat. You can

use the Problem Clarification Checklist in Worksheet 1-3 to help you put your finger on your problems.

Consider what problems you have and how they impact on different areas of your life. Work, home life, relationships, physical health, and school are some areas your problems may impact. Review your list and look for any overlapping symptoms. An example of problems overlapping may be decreased ability to concentrate at work due to sleep disturbance.



Mike has arthritis and is very rarely pain-free. Some days are better than others, but the pain is getting him down. Lately, Mike has been drinking more in the evening to help him sleep. Table 1-3 shows how Mike ranks his problems.

TABLE 1-3 Mike’s Problem Ranking Worksheet

Rank: Problem	Description of Effects
First-ranking problem: Chronic pain from arthritis	Aches in elbows, wrists, and knees. I’m not able to do activities that I used to really enjoy. My sleep is disturbed because pain often wakes me up. My mood is poor.
Second-ranking problem: Depression	I don’t feel like seeing friends or spending time with my family. I find housework and daily shopping overwhelming. I spend too much time dwelling on my thoughts and feelings. I drink alcohol to numb my pain and depressed feelings.
Third-ranking problem: Alcohol use	Sometimes a lot of alcohol can help me sleep, but I wake up feeling worse. I don’t like the idea of needing to rely on alcohol to cope. I’ve read that alcohol is a depressant, so I guess it may be worsening my depression.

In Mike’s example, you see that his feelings of depression stem from chronic pain but that his use of alcohol is actually making his depression worse. By examining his Problem Ranking Worksheet, Mike can choose to intervene at several points. Now use Worksheet 1-3 to rank your own problems.

WORKSHEET 1-3 My Problem Ranking Worksheet

Rank: Problem	Description of Effects
First-ranking problem:	
Second-ranking problem:	
Third-ranking problem:	



TIP

You may want to continue the worksheet to include a fourth- or fifth-ranking problem. However, be careful not to make things seem worse than they are! Try to stick to ranking your *main* problems and realize that a lot of other feelings you may be having, such as irritation or loneliness, are often problem *effects* (or in CBT terms, *emotional consequences*).

Breaking down your behaviors

Disturbed emotions tend to lead to destructive and self-destructive behaviors. Destructive behavior rarely aids effective problem-solving. On the contrary, it often creates further problems or worsens existing ones. Worksheet 1-4 is yet another checklist to help you identify different types of big, bad, and ugly behaviors that you may sometimes recognize yourself doing.

WORKSHEET 1-4 Checklist of “Bad Behaviors”

Self-destructive behaviors:

- ☐ Drinking excessively
- ☐ Eating poorly (too much or too little)
- ☐ Engaging in high-risk sexual activities
- ☐ Gambling
- ☐ Lashing out verbally or physically
- ☐ Spending money compulsively or recklessly
- ☐ Sulking
- ☐ Taking risks when angry (such as driving recklessly)
- ☐ Using illegal drugs

Mood-lowering behaviors:

- ☐ Isolating yourself from friends and family
- ☐ Letting daily chores mount up
- ☐ Neglecting your hygiene
- ☐ Not asking others for help or support
- ☐ Not engaging in activities you usually enjoy
- ☐ Repeatedly calling in sick at work
- ☐ Sleeping too much or too little
- ☐ Staying in bed all day
- ☐ Staying indoors most of the time
- ☐ Stopping taking your medication

Avoidance behaviors:

- ☐ Avoiding exercise
- ☐ Doing other unrelated tasks rather than doing what actually needs to be done (such as tidying your desk rather than writing an essay)
- ☐ Engaging in superstitious behavior in an attempt to ward off feared events
- ☐ Not answering the phone
- ☐ Not opening the mail (such as bills)
- ☐ Not speaking much in social gatherings
- ☐ Putting off tasks
- ☐ Staying away from situations that you find threatening (elevators, busy places, parties, and so on)
- ☐ Using rituals to help quell anxious thoughts and feelings

Because they’re human, many people exhibit some of the types of behaviors in this list from time to time. However, these types of behavior are very frequently linked to psychological problems. The more items you’ve checked off, the more probable it is that you’re experiencing emotional disturbance. In turn, your “bad” behaviors are almost certainly making things worse.



EXAMPLE

Stevie has social phobia and feels very anxious in social settings. Table 1–4 shows Stevie’s top five unhelpful behaviors.

TABLE 1-4

Stevie’s Top Five “Unhealthy Behaviors”

1. Keeping quiet in social settings until I’m absolutely certain what I want to say
2. Avoiding going to parties where I don’t know everybody
3. Eating lunch on my own at work
4. Spending too much time indoors
5. Only going to the mall during quiet periods

Stevie’s big five fall under the Avoidance Behaviors category on the checklist in Worksheet 1–4. She may feel better in the short term because she’s trying so hard to avoid situations in which she feels anxious. In the long term, however, Stevie is keeping her anxiety alive because she doesn’t give herself the chance to discover that she can survive social awkwardness.

The big checklist of bad behaviors in Worksheet 1–4 can serve as a guideline for identifying your top five behaviors that may be perpetuating your problems. We offer space to identify your own bad behaviors in Worksheet 1–5.

WORKSHEET 1-5 My Top Five Unhealthy Behaviors

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Connecting Emotion, Thinking, and Behavior

To put together everything from this chapter, start by selecting an emotion to investigate. This is your target emotion. In Tables 1-5 and 1-6 Margot chose depression as her target emotion and Tom selected anxiety. You get to choose your target emotion in Worksheet 1-6.

Next consider how your target emotion is affecting your thoughts. Margot's depression-based thinking includes ideas that socializing is pointless and she puts herself down for being a "Debbie Downer." Tom's anxiety-based thinking leads him to conclude that he's helpless in the face of his fears and unable to cope with the discomfort of anxiety.

Now examine how your target emotion and feeling-based thinking are leading you to act. Think about what your target emotion makes you feel like doing. You can include past, present, or even potential future actions. Margot's depressed thoughts lead her to isolate herself, and Tom's anxious thinking tells him to continue avoiding public transport.

Finally, examine how your feeling-based behavior is effecting your target emotion. By isolating herself from her friends, Margot actually makes her depression worse. Tom eases his anxiety in the short term by refusing to get on the bus, but his avoidance makes him even more fearful of using public transport.

TABLE 1-5 Margot's Behavior Effect Analysis

Target emotion:	Depression
Feeling-based thinking:	Going to see a film with my friends is pointless. I don't enjoy socializing anymore, and nobody wants to be around a Debbie Downer like me anyway.
Feeling-based behavior:	Declining invitation to go to see a movie. Staying indoors and avoiding phone calls from friends.
Effect of behavior on target emotion:	I end up lonely and isolated. I give myself a hard time for neglecting my friends. I seem to end up feeling even more depressed.

TABLE 1-6 Tom's Behavior Effect Analysis

Target emotion:	Anxiety
Feeling-based thinking:	Using public transport is too uncomfortable and scary. I'll only panic if I try to use the subway. It's just too painful to even try going on the bus.
Feeling-based behavior:	Walking instead of using public transport. Only going to places I can drive to.
Effect of behavior on target emotion:	The longer I avoid going on subways and buses, the more anxious I feel about it. Lately, I feel anxious if I even go near a subway station or bus stop. Ultimately, I feel my anxiety increasing.

After completing your own Behavior Effect Analysis, you may realize that some of your actions are perpetuating your problems, even though they seem to make sense based on your feelings. We look more closely at this concept (and ways to overcome it!) in Chapters 7, 9, and 10.

WORKSHEET 1-6 My Behavior Effect Analysis

Target emotion:	
Feeling-based thinking:	
Feeling-based behavior:	
Effect of behavior on target emotion:	

Picturing Your Problems as a Simple A-B-C

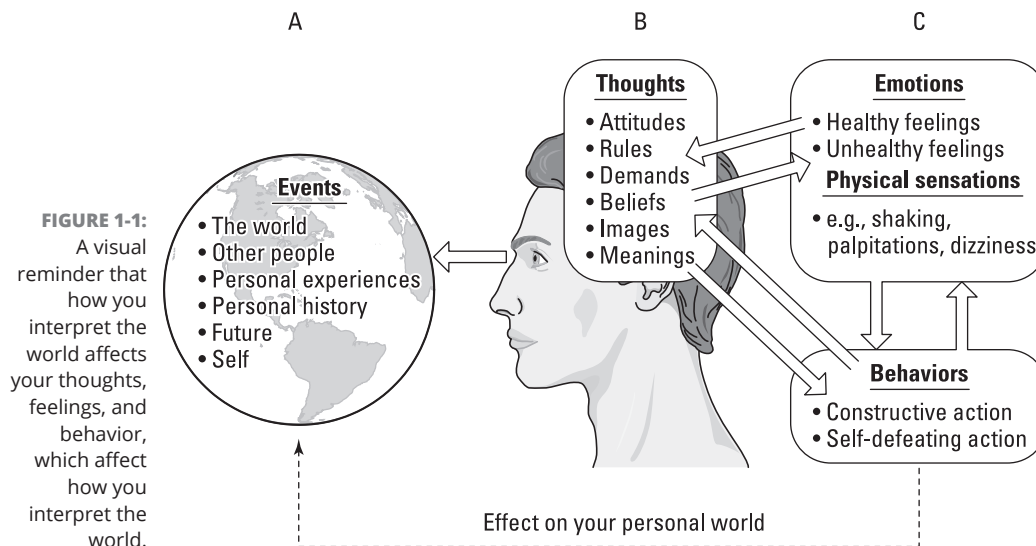
By this stage you can see that:

- » Your thoughts, beliefs, personal meanings, and behavior affect how you feel.
- » Your feelings affect how you behave.

Also note that your emotional state can further affect how you think and how you view the world around you. For example, if you're depressed, you tend to have more depressed thoughts and the world may seem bleak, dangerous, and joyless. You may notice bad things in the news and focus much more on negative aspects of your own life. If you're not depressed, the world looks much brighter, even though very little in your personal circumstances has actually changed.

The diagram in Figure 1-1 shows how life events, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors interact and potentially influence one another. We include this figure here as a visual recap of what we've introduced in this chapter. In the figure:

- » **Events** include all your past and present experiences, as well as things that may happen in the future. Events can be global or personal or involve other people in your life.
- » **Thoughts** include anything that goes on in your mind. Philosophies you live by, personal standards and morals, as well as the way you think about yourself, others, and the world all fall into the *Thoughts* category.
- » **Emotions** include feelings of anger, guilt, sadness, and so on. In Chapter 6, we show you the difference between functional distressed feelings and unhelpful disturbed feelings.
- » **Behavior** basically includes anything that you do. Your actions and deliberate inaction are both types of behavior. As with emotions, it's possible to have both constructive and destructive behavioral responses to events.



TIP

The A-B-C format is the main method CBT uses to formulate or chart problems. We go into the A-B-C format in much more detail in Chapter 3, but Table 1-7 shows basically how it works.

TABLE 1-7 Simple A-B-C Chart

A (Activating Event)	B (Belief/Thought)	C (Emotional and Behavioral Consequences)
Failing an important test	I'm a total idiot for failing.	Emotional: Depression
	I should not have failed!	Behavioral: Decide that retaking the exam is pointless

In essence, the Simple A-B-C Chart is very similar to Worksheet 1-1. However, Worksheet 1-7 shows the format you most often see used in CBT books like this one.



REMEMBER

One of the key benefits of the ABC sequence is that can serve as a reminder that how you feel about experiences is influenced by the meaning you bring to them. Practicing your ABCs can help you identify these meanings and work on changing them if they're unhelpful.

WORKSHEET 1-7 My Simple A-B-C Chart

A (Activating Event)	B (Belief/Thought)	C (Emotional and Behavioral Consequences)
		Emotional:
		Behavioral: