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MIND OVER PAIN: THE ROLE OF COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY

What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a hands-on approach to problem solving that is used to treat depression, anxiety, chronic pain and other chronic illness. It helps you to use the power of your mind to keep you more comfortable and content.

A formal CBT program is not like a traditional counseling session. CBT is a short (typically 8-10 sessions) program where you explore your emotional and behavioral responses to your pain. You will then work with your CBT practitioner to develop alternative responses that you can practice. CBT is most effective for pain when it is used in combination with other medical, surgical, or physical therapy treatments.

This pamphlet will help you to understand CBT and to try some CBT techniques on your own.



You may have experienced a time when you were not feeling well and were visited by a dear friend. Surprisingly, you may have felt better when she was visiting. Perhaps you have also experienced a time when you were not feeling well, and you saw someone that you do not like. Did you notice that your pain may have felt worse when you were with that person? This is the power of your mind to change your pain experience. Using techniques such as CBT (also Mindfulness Meditation and Resilience Training) can help you to use the power of your brain to work for you and improve your quality of life.

Negative thoughts, particularly those associated with stressful ideas, actually change the chemistry in your brain and body. These thoughts have been shown to activate the adrenal gland which releases stress hormones. These stress hormones cause your body to produce more inflammation and other proteins that can increase pain. In addition, negative thoughts change the way the nerves in your spinal cord and brain process pain. Learning to change your thoughts about your pain can really reduce the pain that you experience.

This is not just a matter of putting on a happy face and pretending everything is ok. CBT involves looking at all sides of a problem without emotion and then finding a more balanced approach to how we respond. CBT actually can change the chemistry in your brain and nerves that are involved in sensing pain to reduce the sensation of pain.

So, What Does CBT Look Like?

Your pain begins to worsen. You start to worry - what if it gets worse? What if it gets so bad that I can't handle it? What if this is something dangerous? Do I have cancer? I have work to do, what if I can't make my deadline? I can't afford to lose this job. How will I take care of myself and my kids?

You can see that this thought process, although very natural, is also something that can increase the stress of having pain.

You can also see that there are multiple places where you could substitute different thoughts and actions that might make a pain flare more tolerable.

For example:**What if my pain gets really bad?**

Are there things you can do? Put on more comfortable shoes, looser pants, use a heating pad, go for a short walk or take a stretch to reduce the pain flare. If you are cold, you may tense up your muscles. Add a layer of clothing or use an electric blanket.

What if this is something dangerous?

Make sure that you have ruled out all of the dangerous and serious conditions with your pain management provider. Ask your provider for warning signs. When you have a pain flare, review those signs and if they are not present then you can remind yourself “This is a pain flare and isn’t dangerous. I don’t like it, but the flare will calm down and I have managed it before.”

I have work to do. What if I miss my deadline?

Is this likely? Given how you feel now can you finish some or most of your work?

Can you work with your boss to extend the deadline or get help? Can you apply for FMLA (Family Medical Leave Act) to get protections at work? Can you make a little time right now to take care of yourself and then get back to work? You can substitute thoughts like - my project is almost done. I will not worry about it being perfect, but perfect but will get a first draft done now and know that it doesn’t have to be perfect.



The best time to address your pain is when you are not in the middle of a pain flare. Plan ahead so that you will have a way to constructively manage the flare.

Write a list of things that you can do to help reduce the pain. Carry that list with you. Or keep a copy in your wallet, car, and at work so you will always be able to find your list. Sometimes when pain is at its worst it is harder to remember your planplan, so you can rely on your list. Make sure that you include statements that you can say to yourself that will reinforce your new thought process, such as: “This is my pain. It is flaring now but that flare will pass. I have handled this before. I can do it again.”

Resist blaming yourself or thinking that you did something to cause the pain. Set goals and work towards them. Many people with chronic pain will have only 1 goal for their life – getting rid of the pain. This goal may not be easy to achieveachieve, and it may not be in your control. People often put everything else on hold while they wait for their pain to get better. This can lead to a feeling of failure if the pain continues. Instead, pick 2 or 3 things that are important to you. Break each goal down into baby steps and give yourself credit for each step that you achieve. Remember these goals during a pain flare.



Do not think that the recommendation to try CBT implies that your pain is in your head. It is not. Pain is complex and the longer you have had your pain, the more difficult it may be to get a cure. You want to feel that you, and not your pain, are in control of your life. While working with your pain provider to find treatments for your pain, you should focus on creating a life where you can do the things that

are most important to you. CBT helps to harvest the power of your brain to work with you, not against you. It can help you to regain some control over your life.