



Can you tell me a little about Cognitive and Behavioral Therapies (CBT) for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

If you need treatment for PTSD, the types of treatment one may seek will depend on many factors including the elapsed time since the traumatic event. An excellent site summarizing the scientific literature on these issues may be found at <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>, <https://www.hrsa.gov/behavioral-health/ptsd-national-center-ptsd>, and <https://www.nctsn.org/>.

Individuals with post-traumatic stress often face persistent, recurrent thoughts of the trauma and a variety of negative emotions and physical symptoms. The memories of trauma can also be fragmented, with many individuals reporting an inability to recall significant aspects of the trauma. Negative thoughts and emotions are often triggered by a wide range of situations or events linked to the trauma. Consequently, people try to escape these thoughts and feelings because they are so frightening and distressing. Unfortunately, avoiding or escaping thoughts, feelings or situations only makes these symptoms worse because the person continues to react as if the events were still happening and does not learn that new situations may not be fraught with danger.

Cognitive and behavioral Therapies (CBT) have demonstrated promising results with acute and post-traumatic stress as well as other problems that might be set in motion by trauma. CBT has been shown to be effective in treating individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder and has also been shown to work in preventing onset of post-traumatic stress disorder. When used preventatively, CBT appears to be best applied two to four weeks after the event, at the earliest, and with at least three to four sessions of work with a therapist. When used as a treatment (*Prolonged Exposure, Cognitive Processing Therapy, Cognitive Therapy, Trauma Focused CBT*) for individuals who have already developed post-traumatic stress disorder, CBT is generally administered over a four-to-six-month period. Depending on the individual and the severity and complexity of the problem(s), the length of treatment may very well be longer. The positive results of CBT also hold for individuals with a chronic history of trauma. Greater amounts of elapsed time since the trauma does not seem to lessen its effectiveness.

CBT teaches individuals new skills for handling their emotions and to view themselves, others, and the world in more adaptive ways. The fact that the trauma occurred cannot be changed, but the therapy helps to minimize its negative effects in the long run. It aims to help people see themselves and their worlds more adaptively by modifying the distorted or unhelpful ways of thinking that have been linked to problems in emotion. The therapist tries to help the individual view trauma and their reactions to it, in ways that are more helpful and balanced. For example, after such an event, people may begin to see the world as a dangerous place or in other excessively negative ways. This keeps the sense of current threat alive and increases anxiety. Assumptions of safety or trust are often shattered. They may also think of themselves as unable to cope with the feelings that have resulted or may criticize themselves for this reason. CBT modifies these unhelpful patterns of thinking, and in doing so, helps people experience less anxiety and improved functioning over time.

CBT also helps the person learn face distressing moments without escaping or avoiding unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or situations. CBT helps them face their trauma memories, negative emotions, and situations that trigger distress because they have become associated with the traumatic event. Facing these difficult memories, thoughts, feelings, and situations helps individuals learn that they can handle distress and that distress subsides on its own without using artificial methods to prematurely stop them. Through this process, individuals learn to accept themselves without judgment, process what happened to them, and assign balanced meaning to the traumatic event and what followed.

A visit to www.academyofcft.org will provide a complete list of certified CBT therapists, all of whom have met rigorous standards for competency in CBT.

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References:

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