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What is CBT?

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What is a Cognitive Behavioural Approach?

A Cognitive Behavioural (CB) approach is a way of looking at and understanding what is happening in a given situation. It takes into account the various components that are at play in any situation. This can be applied to understanding specific problems such as anxiety or depression, as well as helping us to understand very specific individual problems that we might be experiencing.

The approach is based on the premise that in any given situation we have five different elements at play that can interact with one another. These elements are:

ENVIRONMENT

This is anything that is external to us and will include other people that we might interact with (family members, friends, managers, work colleagues etc). It includes external situations (the supermarket, work, the car, a grievance process, your job requirements etc) and our day-to-day experiences. Basically anything that is external to you as an individual but which can have an influence on you.

COGNITIONS

This is a word to describe our thought processes, the things we tell ourselves consciously and the fleeting thoughts that flash through our mind all the time. These thoughts give meaning to our environment and our experiences. Sometimes we are very conscious of the meaning of things and sometimes these may be more fleeting meanings or associations that we may struggle to be aware of. For example you may feel uncomfortable in a crowd but be unaware of your thoughts about this, whereas following an argument with your work colleague you may be aware of the angry thoughts that are running through your mind and fuelling your frustration.

Our thoughts/meanings can be about anything, for example they can be about things in our environment (“My boss is an idiot!”), about physical sensation (“My chest feels tight, something must be wrong with me”), about a behaviour (“If I leave work before I finish my tasks

I am a failure”) or even about an emotion (“Oh no, I’m feeling anxious again. This must mean I am back to square one!”).

As such, the meaning we attach to things can drive other areas of our lives. These meanings can be consciously learnt or may be unconsciously associated following previous experiences.

EMOTIONS

Our emotions are the feelings that we have including experiences like anxiety, stress, anger, guilt, depression, sadness, happiness, joy, excitement, disappointment, frustration etc. Our emotions are on a continuum; we can feel a range of intensity of a single emotion. Different types of cognition/meaning give rise to different types of emotion (as we will see later). Our biology plays a large part in the experience of emotions. Without physical changes occurring within our body we could not experience an emotion.

BIOLOGY

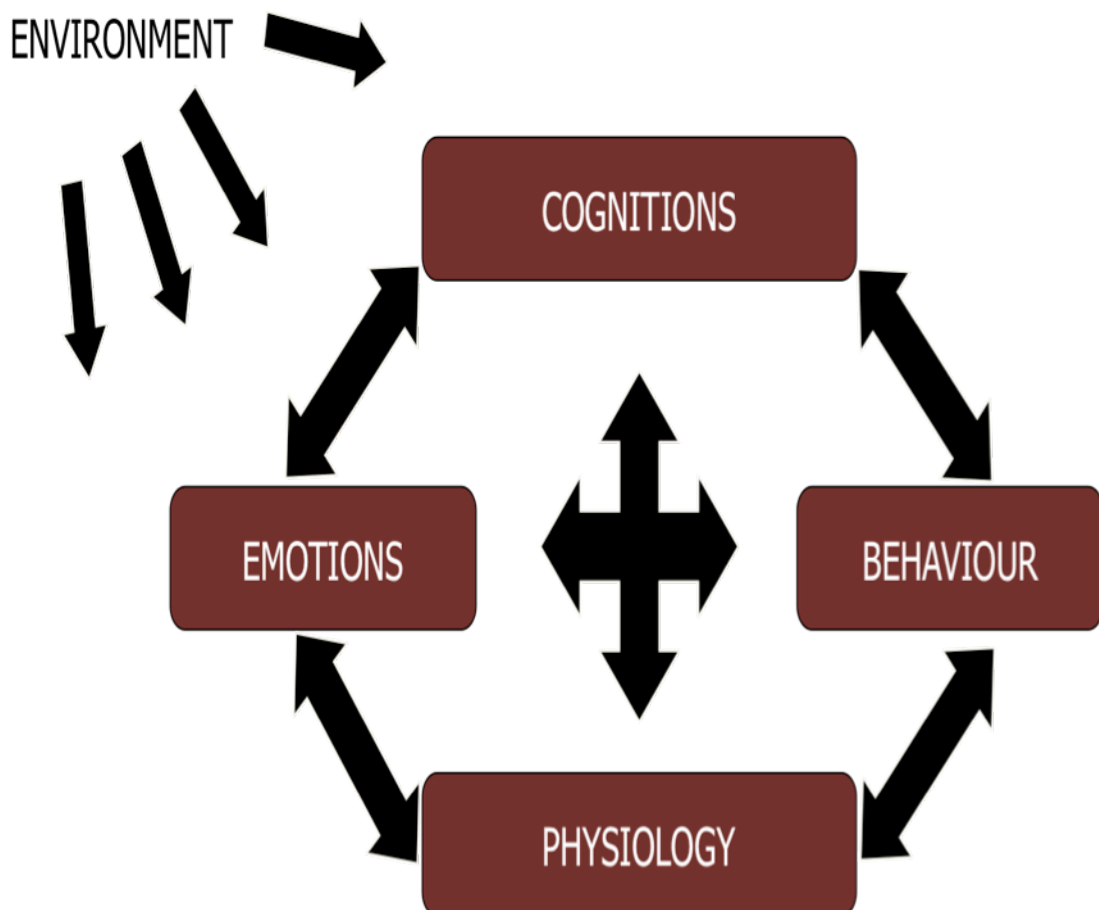
By biology we mean anything internal within your body, such as the chemicals and hormones that circulate, your heart beat, the tension in your muscles etc. As mentioned previously changes occur within your body to enable you to feel an emotion. The greater this change, the greater the intensity of the emotion. Later we will describe the biology of anxiety and depression.

BEHAVIOURS

Our behaviours encompass the things that we do; this can include both our physical seen behaviours (leaving a situation when you feel anxious) as well as our internal unseen behaviours (imagining yourself somewhere else when you feel distressed).

These five areas (**ENVIRONMENT, COGNITIONS, EMOTION, BIOLOGY, BEHAVIOUR**) interact with one another in a reciprocal fashion with one area influencing another, which in turn influences another, much like a cycle effect as you can see in the diagram below.

COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL MODEL



EXAMPLE 1

If you had arranged a hot date for 7pm this evening and the person didn't turn up, the way you think about this/make sense of it will determine your emotional response, physical sensations and behaviour.

See the table below: Following your hot date not arriving:

COGNITION	EMOTION	BIOLOGY	BEHAVIOUR
"How dare they stand me up like this, they should have phoned me!"	Frustration Anger	Hot Tense Agitated	Call and leave an angry message
"It's me, I am not good enough, they changed their mind, I will never be loved"	Low Sad Depressed	Heart sink Loss of energy Decreased motivation and drive	Crying Isolate self Go to bed
"This is awful they must have been in an accident!"	Anxious Worried Stressed	Heart racing Sweaty palms Churning stomach	Checking behaviours, (ringing mobile, hospitals, checking travel)

As you can see the emotional/biological and behavioural response is different according to the meaning of the event not just the event itself.

EXAMPLE 2

The following scenario further highlights the way that changes in our thinking can affect our behaviour, emotions, physical reactions, and can lead to changes in our social environment.

Imagine that at the start of a new course you had the following negative thought

- **Thought:**
‘There is no point in studying as I am bound to fail’.
- **Behaviour:**
Stopped studying, and gave up course.
- **Emotion:**
‘Fed up’ for giving in, ‘lonely’ not seeing friends.
- **Physical:**
Less active, due to non-attendance at college.
- **Environment:**
Less contact with friends reduced social contact.

The CB Approach is based on the fact that all five areas interlink. It uses well grounded theories which help us understand normal processes of emotion and can help us to identify any aspects that may be influencing or altering these natural processes. It focuses on direct change in the areas of cognition and behaviour because these are the only two areas of all five that we have the ability to take direct control over. In doing so, we can indirectly influence the other areas of emotion and biology.