

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy and Coaching

by Lisa Van Allen, MS, PhD

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a method used by psychologists, social workers and counselors to help people change their behavior by changing the way they think. This method is based on the work of Dr. Aaron Beck, and on a previous system called Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) developed by Dr. Albert Ellis. The premise is that while life events, such as a job loss, or biochemical changes in the brain can cause emotional problems, these events are just the “tip of the iceberg”. Lying below the surface is the massive base of beliefs, attitudes, and related cognitive processes that cause us to define, judge, and respond to life.

CBT focuses on patterns of thinking that are unhealthy and the beliefs that underlie these thoughts. For example, a person who is depressed may have the belief, "I'm worthless". This person treats herself as unworthy and accepts poor treatment from others. Circumstances or the environment in which that person lives may seem to support this belief, and so the thought becomes an ingrained behavior.

The cognitive-behavioral therapist demonstrates how to challenge these beliefs and will help create experiments that monitor thoughts and behavior in order to expose the negative thinking patterns. When lies are exposed and replaced with truth, people are able to develop new healthy behaviors.

Therapists who use CBT are active, problem-focused, and goal-directed. CBT's focus on thoughts and beliefs are applicable to a wide array of issues including panic disorder, schizophrenia, and depression. Because CBT has excellent empirical support, it has achieved wide popularity both for therapists and consumers.

It should therefore come as no surprise that CBT also has uses in coaching. Self-limiting beliefs occur in the healthy just as much as in those struggling with a mental disease or disorder. The negative beliefs and behaviors may not be nearly as extreme or debilitating, but they get in the way of successful living. Combining CBT (challenging thinking patterns, monitoring, and experimenting with new ways of thinking) with coaching techniques (i.e. active listening, powerful questions, and accountability) accelerates the process toward POWER-Filled living.