

# Chapter 1

## Exploring the Basics of CBT

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Seeing the science and the sense of CBT
- ▶ Making CBT work for you
- ▶ Understanding your personal events
- ▶ Putting problems into an ABC format

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 recognise how your thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes impact on your feelings. Once you understand this principle, you can then work on changing your thinking and behaviour 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 behavioural therapy – CBT for short – 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* – your thoughts – and on *behaviour* – your actions. One way of summing up CBT is to say 'you feel the way you think'. But CBT also looks closely at behaviour, since the way you act is often determined by how you feel. Furthermore, the way you act can have a positive or negative influence on your feelings. Without necessarily realising it, you may be acting in ways that are actually fuelling your bad feelings.

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

### *Blinding you with the science of CBT*

CBT practitioners are interested not only in helping people to *feel* better in the short term but also in using scientifically verified strategies to help people *get* better and stay better in the long term. CBT has been tested and developed through many scientific studies. With continued research it is likely that more will be learnt about which techniques work best for specific

types of problems. 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 use 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.

Okay. So here might be 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 and anything else that goes through your mind including your dreams, memories, images, and your focus of attention.
- ✔ **Behaviour:** 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 – 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. It also means your personal rules, codes, and attitudes for living.
- ✔ **Consequence:** Describes the result or outcome of an event of some kind. In this book we mainly refer to behaviour and emotional consequences (basically the kind of results produced by ways of acting or from specific emotions).
- ✔ **Distress:** Refers to normal negative human emotions that, though uncomfortable and unpleasant, don't cause you long-term problems.
- ✔ **Disturbance:** Refers to more extreme, intense negative emotions that can cause long-term problems and interfere significantly in your life.
- ✔ **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 feelings.
- ✔ **Exposure:** Refers to 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 behaviour, thoughts, or emotions.
- ✔ **Unhealthy:** Refers to inappropriate and destructive behaviour, thoughts, or emotions.

## *Linking thinking and feeling*

You may generally conclude that if something happens to you, such as your car breaking down, that it is the actual event that makes you feel angry or anxious. Makes sense right? Well, not entirely actually, no. According to CBT, what determines the quality and intensity of the emotion you experience are your *thoughts* about the event.

So whilst events contribute to your emotional and behavioural reactions (sometimes significantly), it is your *beliefs*, or the meaning you give to events, that lead you to feel healthy distress or unhealthy disturbance.



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 are very likely to feel intensely distressed. Intense distressed feelings in response to very negative events are still considered healthy because they're appropriate to your experience. But you can avoid becoming disturbed even in the face of very challenging life situations if you monitor your thinking.

## Attaching meaning to events

Positive events normally lead to positive emotions and negative events to negative emotions (rather obviously). 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 husband working late means that he's about to leave you for another woman. 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. 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 6.

- ✓ **Disturbed** refers to inaccurate or rigid ways of thinking about events that lead you to experience extreme unhealthy negative emotions.
- ✓ **Distressed** refers to accurate and balanced ways of thinking about events that lead you to experience appropriate healthy negative emotions.



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 cuddly toy across the room. Worksheet 1-1 shows the disturbed meaning she gave the event.

Worksheet 1-1	Coral's Unhealthy Personal Meaning Page
Event:	<i>Losing my temper with my children</i>
Personal meaning:	<i>I should never get that angry around the kids. This means that I am a terrible mother.</i>
Emotion:	<i>Guilt</i>

The extreme meaning Coral attaches to her loss of temper leads her to feel guilty. Guilt is likely to feed further self-downing and is unlikely to help Coral to make it up to her kids. Worksheet 1-2 shows a more healthy evaluation.



In CBT, we use the term *self-downing* to mean extreme self-criticism or putting yourself down on the basis of your actions. In Chapter 12 we discuss the healthy alternative to self-downing, which is self-acceptance.

Worksheet 1-2	Coral's Healthy Personal Meaning Page
<b>Event:</b>	<i>Losing my temper with my children</i>
Personal meaning:	I wish I hadn't got so angry with the kids. This means that I did a bad thing but I am still a pretty good mum overall.
Emotion:	Remorse

Because Coral attaches an appropriate and fair meaning to her temper tantrum, she experiences a healthy negative emotion. Disappointment helps Coral to condemn her behaviour 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 1-3 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. You may find it useful to use these questions as a guide to filling out the worksheet:

- ✔ What happened exactly? 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 1-3	My Personal Meaning Page
<b>Event:</b>	
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 good that whatever emotional or behavioural problem you're experiencing, this workbook can help get you going in the right direction. Worksheet 1-4 offers a checklist of some of the problems you may experience that CBT can help you overcome.



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 you additional support and guidance. Chapter 19 offers lots of advice on working with a therapist.

Worksheet 1-4	Problem Clarification Checklist
<input type="checkbox"/>	Anger problems
<input type="checkbox"/>	Anorexia
<input type="checkbox"/>	Binge eating or over-eating
<input type="checkbox"/>	Body dysmorphic disorder
<input type="checkbox"/>	Bulimia
<input type="checkbox"/>	Chronic fatigue syndrome
<input type="checkbox"/>	Chronic pain
<input type="checkbox"/>	Depression
<input type="checkbox"/>	Excessive use of alcohol
<input type="checkbox"/>	Excessive use of non-prescription or 'street' drugs
<input type="checkbox"/>	Feelings of low self-worth
<input type="checkbox"/>	Gambling and on-line gambling
<input type="checkbox"/>	Obsessive-compulsive disorder
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ongoing feelings of guilt or shame
<input type="checkbox"/>	Panic attacks
<input type="checkbox"/>	Personality disorders
<input type="checkbox"/>	Post-traumatic stress disorder
<input type="checkbox"/>	Social phobia
<input type="checkbox"/>	Specific phobias
<input type="checkbox"/>	Spending excessive amounts of money
<input type="checkbox"/>	Worrying all the time

Don't be alarmed if you find that you have ticked two, three, or more items on the list; problems often overlap. In fact, for people to have 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 or psychiatrist 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 to see how your problems 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 1-6, later in this chapter, 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 study 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.



Meg has arthritis and is very rarely pain free. Some days are better than others but the pain is getting her down. Lately, Meg has been drinking more in the evening to help her sleep. How she ranks her problems is shown in Worksheet 1-5.

Worksheet 1-5 Meg'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 wine to numb pain and depressed feelings.

<b>Rank: Problem</b>	<b>Description of Effects</b>
Third ranking problem: Alcohol use	Sometimes a lot of wine 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 suppose that it may be worsening my depression.

In Meg's example, you see that her feelings of depression stem from chronic pain but that her use of alcohol is actually making her depression worse. From examining her Problem Ranking Worksheet, Meg can choose to intervene at several points. Now use Worksheet 1-6 to rank your own problems.

<b>Worksheet 1-6 My Problem Ranking Worksheet</b>	
<b>Rank: Problem</b>	<b>Description of Effects</b>
First ranking problem:	
Second ranking problem:	
Third ranking problem:	

You may wish to continue the sheet 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 realise 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 behaviours***

Disturbed emotions tend to lead to destructive and self-destructive behaviours. Destructive behaviour rarely aids effective problem solving. On the contrary, it often creates further problems or worsens existing ones. Worksheet 1-7 is yet another checklist to help you to identify different types of big, bad, and ugly behaviours that you may sometimes recognise yourself doing.

Worksheet 1-7	Checklist of Bad Behaviours
<b><i>Self-destructive behaviours:</i></b>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Drinking excessively
<input type="checkbox"/>	Eating poorly (too much or too little)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Engaging in high-risk sexual activities
<input type="checkbox"/>	Gambling
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lashing out verbally or physically
<input type="checkbox"/>	Spending money compulsively or recklessly
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sulking
<input type="checkbox"/>	Taking risks when angry (such as reckless driving)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Using illegal drugs
<b><i>Mood-lowering behaviours:</i></b>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Isolating yourself from friends and family
<input type="checkbox"/>	Letting daily chores mount up
<input type="checkbox"/>	Neglecting your hygiene
<input type="checkbox"/>	Not asking others for help or support
<input type="checkbox"/>	Not engaging in activities you usually enjoy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Repeatedly calling in sick at work
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sleeping too much or too little
<input type="checkbox"/>	Staying in bed all day
<input type="checkbox"/>	Staying indoors most of the time
<input type="checkbox"/>	Stopping taking your medication
<b><i>Avoidance behaviours:</i></b>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoiding exercise
<input type="checkbox"/>	Doing other unrelated tasks rather than doing what actually needs to be done (such as tidying your desk rather than writing an essay)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Engaging in superstitious behaviour in an attempt to ward off feared events
<input type="checkbox"/>	Not answering the phone
<input type="checkbox"/>	Not opening post (such as bills)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Not speaking much in social gatherings
<input type="checkbox"/>	Putting off tasks
<input type="checkbox"/>	Staying away from situations that you find threatening (lifts, busy places, parties, and so on)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Using rituals to help quell anxious thoughts and feelings

Now, as human beings and therefore given to making mistakes, many people exhibit some of the types of behaviours in the list from time to time. However, these types of behaviours are very frequently linked to psychological problems. The more items you've ticked off on the checklist, the more probable it is that you're experiencing emotional disturbance. In turn, your 'bad' behaviours are almost certainly making things worse.



Stewie has social phobia and feels very anxious in social settings. Worksheet 1-8 shows his top five bad behaviours.

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<b>Worksheet 1-8</b>	<b>Stewie's Top Five Bad Behaviours</b>
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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 shops during quiet periods.
- 

Stewie's big five fall under the Avoidance Behaviours category on the checklist in Worksheet 1-7. He may feel better in the short term because he's trying so hard to avoid situations in which he feels anxious. In the long term, however, Stewie is keeping his anxiety alive because he doesn't give himself the chance to discover that he can survive social awkwardness.

The big checklist of bad behaviours in Worksheet 1-7 can serve as a guideline for identifying your top five behaviours that may be perpetuating your problems. We offer space to identify your own bad behaviours in Worksheet 1-9.

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<b>Worksheet 1-9</b>	<b>My Top Five Bad Behaviours</b>
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- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.
- 

## Connecting Emotion, Thinking, and Behaviour

To put everything from this chapter together, start by selecting an emotion to investigate. This is your target emotion. In Worksheets 1-10 and 1-11 Margot chose depression as her target emotion and Tom selected anxiety. You get to choose your target emotion in Worksheet 1-12.

Next consider how your target emotion is effecting your thoughts. Margot’s depression-based thinking includes ideas that socialising is pointless and she puts herself down for being a ‘misery guts’. 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 behaviour 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.

<b>Worksheet 1-10 Margot’s Behaviour Effect Analysis</b>	
Target emotion:	Depression
Feeling-based thinking:	Going to see a film with my friends is pointless. I don’t enjoy socialising anymore and nobody wants to be around a misery guts like me anyway.
Feeling-based behaviour:	Declining invitation to go to see film. Staying indoors and avoiding phone calls from friends.
Effect of behaviour 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.

<b>Worksheet 1-11 Tom’s Behaviour Effect Analysis</b>	
Target emotion:	Anxiety
Feeling-based thinking:	Using public transport is too uncomfortable and scary. I’ll only panic if I try to use the tube. It’s just too painful to even try going on the bus.
Feeling-based behaviour:	Walking instead of using public transport. Only going to places I can drive to.
Effect of behaviour on target emotion:	The longer I avoid going on tubes and buses, the more anxious I feel about it. Lately I feel anxious even if I go near a tube station or bus stop. Ultimately I feel my anxiety increasing.

Worksheet 1-12	My Behaviour Effect Analysis
Target emotion:	
Feeling-based thinking:	
Feeling-based behaviour:	
Effect of behaviour on target emotion:	

After completing your own Behaviour Effect Analysis, you may realise 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.

## *Picturing Your Problems As a Simple ABC*

By this stage you can see that:

- ✓ Your thoughts, beliefs, or personal meanings affect how you feel
- ✓ Your feelings affect how you behave
- ✓ Your behaviour also affects how you feel

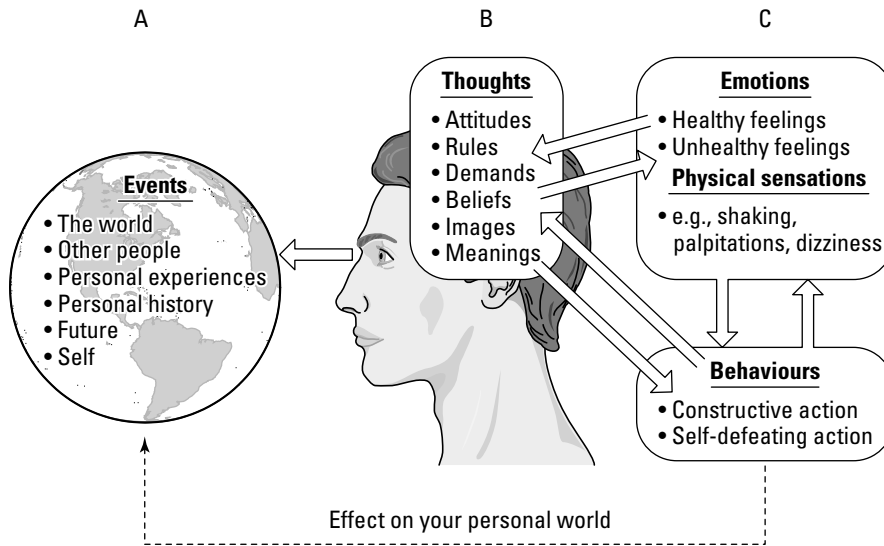
Also note that your emotional state can further affect how you think and how you view the world around you. For example, if you're depressed then you tend to have more depressed thoughts and the world may seem bleak, dangerous, and joyless. You may notice bad things in the news and focus much more on negative aspects of your own life. Whereas when 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 behaviours interact and potentially influence one another. We include this figure here as a visual recap on what has been introduced in this chapter. In the figure:

- ✓ **Events** include all your past and present experiences plus things that may happen in the future. Events can be global, 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, plus 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.
- ✓ **Behaviour** basically includes anything that you do. Your actions and deliberate inaction are both types of behaviour. As with emotions, it's possible to have both constructive and destructive behavioural responses to events.

**Figure 1-1:**  
A visual reminder that how you interpreted the world affects your thoughts, feelings, and behaviour, which in turn affect how you interpret the world.



It is our intention to keep things simple but sometimes we muddy the waters. And we do appreciate you bearing with us. If you've read this chapter and done the exercises (at least some of them), then you're well on your way to using CBT!

Following are two examples of what we mean by this and a chance for you to apply it yourself.

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 Worksheet 1-13 shows basically how it works.

**Worksheet 1-13 Simple A-B-C Chart**

In essence, the Simple A-B-C Chart is very similar to Worksheet 1-3. However, Worksheet 1-14 shows the format you most often see used in CBT books like this one.

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

**Worksheet 1-14****My Simple A-B-C Chart**

<i>A (Activating Event)</i>	<i>B (Belief/Thought)</i>	<i>C (Emotional and Behavioural Consequences)</i>
		Emotional:
		Behavioural:

