



Cognitive Behavior Therapy – The Basics

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Cognitive behavior therapy is a type of counseling that focuses on thoughts-how those thoughts interact with behaviors, and how those behaviors interact with feelings. So why might cognitive behavior therapy be helpful for tinnitus?

Tinnitus is associated with an increased incidence of depression and anxiety over a person's lifetime. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) has been effective for depression, a multitude of anxiety disorders, and a vast array of other medical conditions, including diabetes, irritable bowel disorder, and chronic pain conditions.

People with a high attention to their tinnitus and poor coping techniques are found to be more depressed; more distressed, and have higher perceived handicaps. Cognitive behavior therapy provides skills to reduce internal attention and improve coping by devising alternative thinking and behavior patterns that help in distracting. The overall plan for cognitive behavior therapy is to increase pleasant activity, learn relaxation techniques, and learn cognitive techniques to challenge negative, or not helpful, thinking.

Some people who have severe tinnitus limit their social interactions and their pleasant activities. They may or may not still be going to work. They may also be isolated in their homes and may not be engaged in any activities that could distract them from their tinnitus or increase their overall pleasure with life. When I work with these patients, I ask them to create a list of activities they find pleasant.

Lists usually include: walking, concerts, movies, sporting events, gardening, dining out and exercising.

Then I ask them to think of excuses for not doing these activities, because that's what often happens. The excuses often include: My friends don't have this so they won't understand me. I have no time. I'm too tired. I can't understand what others are saying. It's too loud (a very good excuse).

Next, we write a list of challenges-or alternative options- to those excuses, such as the "too loud," excuse. Option 1: Wear earplugs. Option 2: Ask the manager to turn the music down. Option 3: Go to outdoor cafes, which are often markedly less noisy than indoor restaurants. Option 4: Movie theatres are often too loud, but watching DVD's at home can be enjoyable.

In cognitive behavior therapy, we actually do what we call *activity tracking* in which patients track their activity, the thoughts they have before the activity, and their stress level prior to the activity. Then they do the activity, and track their thoughts and stress level during the activity. Afterward, we ask, "What are your thoughts after the activity? What is your stress level now?"

People often predict that they won't have fun at a particular activity, so they don't attempt it. Cognitive behavior therapy is all about trying it out to see if their prediction is correct. If they don't have fun, and their stress level doesn't go down, we recommend that they don't do it again and that they instead, try something else.

Relaxation techniques also help with distress. Deep breathing is one simple technique. But often we teach progressive muscle relaxation or guided imagery to go along with CBT. Meditation can also be helpful.

We all have thoughts going on in our head all the time – a running commentary that we don't pay much attention to. But if we start to pay attention to it, it can be helpful in improving the way we feel. The first thing I do with CBT is to ask patients to notice that they have thoughts. Then I ask them to notice if they have thinking distortions. We all have them. One example is "all or nothing" thinking, such as, "I've noticed my tinnitus, now my whole day is ruined." It's rather catastrophic to think that if you notice your tinnitus, your whole day is ruined. Another example is, "I have tinnitus, therefore life is rotten." To overcome thinking distortions, patients need to create alternative thoughts to notice other things going on other than the tinnitus. What about the fact that it's a beautiful sunny day today? Yes, you have tinnitus, and it's a beautiful sunny day.

Other kinds of thinking distortions are fortune telling ("I'll never get better" or "I won't enjoy that activity") and self-blaming ("It's all my fault and I ended up with this problem.") These thinking distortions are not helpful.

There are important things about thought that we sometimes overlook. It's just as important to concentrate on positive aspects of what's going on, such as to notice that it's a sunny day outside, as it is to concentrate on having tinnitus.

It's important to make a list of positive things about yourself, to give yourself credit when you do something good, or pat yourself on the back. Everybody has positive aspects. You're reading this magazine to learn more about tinnitus. That's something good that you're doing for yourself.

What can we ask ourselves that will help dispute our negative thoughts? How about that.

"What would my best friend say to me about this though?" (Most of the time we're far more critical of ourselves than those around us are.)

"When I felt this way in the past, what helped me?"

"Am I really 100% to blame for this situation?" (Chances are 100% that you're not 100% to blame for this condition.)

"Five years from now, will I look back at this situation differently?"

"Are there positives in me or the situation that I'm ignoring?"

"What have I learned from prior experience that could be helpful now?"

Having the thoughts, "I'll never get better," usually leads to a feeling of hopelessness.

Look for a dispute to that statement. How about, "I might get better. I really don't know." Or, "I haven't tried everything yet." Or, "there's more scientific research all the time." A more helpful thought generally produced more hopeful feelings.

Redirecting the mind is not an easy task. But there are highly trained professionals to help with this kind of therapy. They can be found by contacting the Association for Advancement of Behavioral Therapy (www.aabt.org under "Find a Therapist," then, "Behavioral Medicine," or 212-647-11890), or the Academy of Cognitive Therapy (www.academyofct.org or 610-664-1273). A favorite do-it-yourself CBT book is *Mind Over Mood* by Greenberger and Padesky.

The main goal in cognitive behavior therapy is to help you feel more in control of your life, to give you more alternatives and options from which to choose. If you say, "I can't enjoy life until my tinnitus is gone," then I would say, "Why can't you enjoy life until your tinnitus is gone? Let's enjoy today and have tinnitus. Let's find a way to do that."

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