

What is Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) for Depression?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a therapy that helps children learn how to get active, solve problems that are causing frustration and sadness, take steps towards goals, and change untrue or unhelpful negative thoughts. Parents learn how to help and support their children in these areas.

How to tell if CBT for Depression is the right plan.

CBT is one of the best evidence-based treatments when children are diagnosed with depression by a qualified mental health professional. Depression is when children are too sad too much of the time, have negative thoughts like they are no good or can't do anything to make their life better, and withdraw and do not take part in normal activities. In serious cases they can think life is not worth living or think about harming themselves.

How do we know that CBT for Depression is effective?

Many studies have shown that depression problems are decreased more with CBT than with non-specific therapy. This is true for different kinds of depression, boys and girls, and children from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

What does CBT for Depression involve?

1. Education. Children and their parents/caregivers learn about depression symptoms and why they are maintained; the connection between thoughts, feelings and behavior; and especially the importance of getting active, taking steps towards goals, and problem solving as the best ways to lift depressed mood. They also learn what is involved in therapy. An important piece of information is that most children will improve if they learn and use the new skills. In addition, they learn that depression can re-occur and that a plan for the future can help.
2. Safety plan. If children are having thoughts about harming themselves a safety plan is made.
3. Getting active. The therapist and child work together to identify "mood boosting" positive activities that the child can do to feel less sad and depressed. A plan for doing activities in between sessions is developed.
4. Taking steps towards goals/problem solving. Children identify problems they want to solve and goals they want to achieve and make a plan in session to take small steps toward solutions or goals in between sessions.

5. Correcting unhelpful or untrue beliefs. Children identify untrue or unhelpful depression-related beliefs like “I’m no good,” “no one likes me” or “I can’t make my life better.” Children learn more accurate and helpful ways to think. They practice the new thoughts in between sessions.
6. Emotion regulation. Children learn to notice depression and frustration symptoms and learn specific skills to handle these difficult emotions in constructive ways in the moment.
7. Parenting. Parents/caregivers learn how to support their children in their plans for getting active, taking steps toward goals, and having more helpful thoughts.

What to expect in CBT for Depression.

It is a structured intervention where the children and their parents/caregivers learn new ways of behaving and thinking. A very important part of CBT is practicing the new behaviors and thoughts both in session AND in between sessions. The therapist, child, and often the caregivers/parents review how the practices went and make plans for future practice.

How long does CBT for Depression take?

Many children complete CBT in 12-15 sessions. Some children and families need fewer sessions, and others need more. CBT is flexible and individualized to the needs of each child and family but always involves getting active. Because depression often re-occurs, planning for booster sessions may be a good idea.