

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Trauma (CBT-T)

What is CBT-T?

CBT-T is a cognitive behavioral therapy that helps youth and families who have been affected by traumatic events. Traumatic events include physical and sexual child abuse, rape or assault, exposure to domestic or community violence, serious accidents, natural or human disasters, violent crime, violent or sudden death, or any other experience that creates threat or fear. Youths can be affected by traumatic events that they experience or witness themselves, or that happen to close loved ones.

How to tell if CBT-T is the right plan.

CBT-T is mainly for traumatic stress, but it works for depression, anxieties, and some behavior problems that might go along with the traumatic stress. Traumatic stress means reactions to the trauma events that are very upsetting or cause problems for the youth at home, school or in other activities. Traumatic stress includes having upsetting memories or being upset at reminders; having sleep problems or nightmares; avoiding people or situations that are reminders of the trauma; shutting down or becoming numb; having concentration problems; being irritable; or being overly alert or jumpy.

To see if CBT-T is the right plan, a provider will usually talk to the youth and caregiver and give them measures that identify potential traumas and related symptoms. If the measures show a significant level of traumatic stress, CBT-T is the right approach.

How do we know that CBT-T is effective?

Many studies have shown that traumatic stress and depression improve more with cognitive behavioral therapy that focuses on trauma specifically compared to non-specific therapy. Youth with all kinds of different traumas, and youth from different ethnic and racial backgrounds benefit just as much.

What does CBT-T involve?

CBT has the following key components:

1. Psychoeducation. The youth and parent/caregiver learn about traumatic stress; typical reactions and why they happen; about the systems that may be involved (like medical, CPS, police or prosecutors) may affect reactions; the connection between thoughts, feelings and behavior; and what is involved in therapy. An important

piece of information is that most youth will recover, especially if they have effective treatment.

2. Coping skills. The youth and parent/caregiver identify trauma-related emotions such as fear or anxiety, sadness or grief, anger, or shame and learn specific skills to handle these difficult emotions in constructive ways.
3. Correcting unhelpful thoughts. The youth and parent/caregiver identify unhelpful trauma-related beliefs like self-blame, that no one can be trusted, or the world is very dangerous all the time. They learn more accurate and helpful ways to think about what happened.
4. Trauma memories. The youth becomes able to remember and talk about what happened without being really upset and learns how to handle trauma reminders. The youth and parent/caregiver come up with a way to put the trauma into perspective as a bad experience that is in the past, so it does not overly influence the present. This is a key part of CBT for trauma.
5. Positive parenting. Parents/caregivers learn to handle behaviors the youth is showing that are difficult or affecting family relationships.

What to expect in CBT-T

In this treatment, the youth and caregiver learn new and better ways to handle the difficult feelings and more helpful ways to think about what happened. A very important part of CBT-T is practicing the skills for handling feelings and thinking in more constructive ways in between sessions.

The trauma-focused part means that the youth and caregiver face what happened, and the youth becomes able to talk and think about what happened without being so upset. This is sometimes hard in the beginning because both the youth and the caregiver may have strong feelings when they remember or think about the trauma. It is understandable that both the child and their caregiver may want to avoid remembering or worry that having to remember will make things worse. But remembering the experience in a safe way is the best way to lower the negative feelings. When the feelings become less strong and more manageable it is easier to put the trauma into perspective and into the past.

How long does CBT-T take?

Many youths complete CBT-T in 12-15 sessions. Some families need fewer sessions, and others need more. CBT-T is flexible and tailored to the needs of each youth and family.