

CPT: Cognitive Processing Therapy

Trauma and its Effects

Having traumatic experiences is very common. Most people will have at least one traumatic experience during their lifetime; many will have more. Everyone is affected by traumatic experiences; but the effects differ. There are differences in how severe, how long-lasting and how much the impact affects everyday life. When the distress is very intense or goes on too long, treatment that directly addresses the trauma can be very helpful.

What is CPT?

CPT focuses mainly on unrealistic and/or unhelpful thoughts a person has about their traumatic experience and/or how the trauma has impacted their beliefs about themselves, others, and the world. These thoughts can cause the memories or reminders of the trauma to be very distressing because thoughts can lead to intense negative feelings such as fear or blame. The idea is to identify and change the unrealistic or unhelpful thoughts in a planned way. When the person thinks in a more realistic and helpful way, remembering or being reminded of the trauma is not so upsetting and the person can return to a normal life.

How does CPT work?

- 1) The thought-feeling-behavior connection is learned. The person learns how a memory or reminder can lead to unrealistic or unhelpful thoughts which cause negative feelings and then leads to behavior that is unhelpful.
- 2) The person writes an impact statement about the traumatic event that includes the thoughts and analyzes it to see where the unrealistic or unhelpful thoughts are. These are called “stuck points”.
- 3) The person comes up with more realistic and helpful replacement thoughts.
- 4) The person practices in between sessions analyzing situations using the thought-feeling-behavior connection and practices using the new thoughts instead.

CPT can seem hard to do at first. Most often people have a feeling without realizing that there is a thought behind it. Learning to stop and figure out the thought and substitute a more helpful thought takes a big effort. However, over time it really works.

How long does CPT take?

Trauma-focused CBT often gets results in a few months. Sometimes treatment can be shorter, sometimes longer depending on the individual and their presenting symptoms.