

Dealing with Feelings:

An Introduction to CBT (Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy)

Did you know that all of our feelings are important? Of course, we'd like to feel happy all of the time, but there are times when we need to feel sad, mad or worried. Those **upset feelings** help us to pay attention to what is happening in our lives. They let us know that we need to do or change something in order to feel happy again. Sometimes, though, our upset feelings can get so big, or may come so fast, that it seems like we can't control them.

But there is good news! We can STOP our feelings from getting out of control. **In therapy, you will learn how to stay in charge of your thoughts, feelings and actions--even when upsetting things happen.**



Step 1: STOP and notice what you are thinking.

Here's an important fact that not everyone knows: Your feelings are caused not just by what happens but also by your THOUGHTS about what happens. And here's another important fact: Sometimes those thoughts come so fast that you may not even be aware of them.

Imagine that something happens and immediately your brain says: *This is awful, this is terrible, I can NOT let this happen.* With that thought, you are going to feel upset and want to do something right away. You aren't going to spend time sitting around thinking!

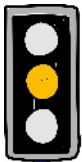
Those fast thoughts are a good thing if, for example, a car is about to run you over. You feel upset and get your body pumped up (fast breath, tense muscles, rapid heart) and ready to do the right thing (move fast and get out of the way of that car!). Even though your thoughts came so fast that you hardly noticed them, those thoughts did a great job: they told you something **true** and important and then your feelings

and your body took over and helped you to make a good choice.

But, here's a REALLY BIG problem: sometimes those first, fast thoughts are not exactly TRUE. And if they are not exactly true they are not going to be so helpful. They may even make things worse! Let's say that your mom told you to stop playing a game because it's time for bed. Let's imagine that your brain sent that same first, fast thought: *This is awful, this is terrible, I can NOT let this happen!* And with these thoughts, you will have the same reaction: fast breath, tense muscles, rapid heart and feeling really upset.

But this time, those thoughts are not so true. Although you'd *rather* keep playing, it's not really true that stopping your game is awful and terrible. But your body will still focus on its job and act *as if* you can't let this terrible thing happen. You may choose to throw a fit to keep it from happening. And then your mom says no more games for the rest of the week. This time, those first, fast thoughts did not help you and in fact made things worse.

In therapy, you will learn to identify thoughts that are not helpful.



Step 2: Slow down and get calm.

Once your body gets the message from your brain that something is wrong, your body's job is to get ready for action. Your body *really* wants to protect you. So once it starts doing that job, it's not going to want to stop. That's a good thing when there is a true problem like a car rushing toward you, but if your brain has sent a message that isn't totally true, your body still is just as focused on its job.

Here's another important fact: even though it is difficult to stop your body from reacting, it's not impossible. **Another thing you will learn in therapy is some very helpful strategies for slowing down your body's reactions so that you can get calm.**

Step 3: Give the green light to ideas that are true and helpful.

With Step 1, you have identified some thoughts are not helpful. With Step 2, you have learned how to calm yourself when you have those unhelpful thoughts. Now you are ready for the next, very important step: replacing those unhelpful thoughts with thoughts that are accurate and helpful.

Another thing that you will do in therapy is to practice finding new and helpful ways for your brain to think about what happens. Just like anything else, the more you practice, the better your brain will be at re-thinking.

So, that's the good news! If you learn to follow these three steps, you won't have to stay stuck in upsetting feelings. You'll be able to think more clearly about things that happen to you, stay calm, and make good choices.

