

COPING WITH CHRONIC PAIN



Sofia M. Chernoff, PsyD
Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy

Sarah Fleming, BA
Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy

“This pain is unbearable. Nothing helps.”

“I can’t do the things I want to do.”

“I’m scared my pain will only get worse.”

“There’s nothing I can do to feel better—why even try?”

“My chronic pain stops me from living my life.”

Living with chronic pain is an incredibly challenging experience. When pain persists daily or interrupts meaningful activities, it is natural to experience negative thoughts and emotions. Over time, individuals may come to believe that their pain is in control and that they are helpless, “broken,” or a burden to their loved ones. Unfortunately, these beliefs can prevent them from effectively coping with their pain and even make their experience of pain worse.

“ARE YOU SAYING THIS IS ALL IN MY HEAD?”

Why do medical providers often recommend psychological treatments for pain along with other treatments? Both chronic and acute pain have a psychological component. In other words, pain can have a profound effect on the way people think, feel, and behave—and at the same time, the way people think, feel, and behave can impact their experience of pain. Individuals experiencing pain may feel discouraged, frustrated, or hopeless and may



stop engaging in meaningful activities, or struggle to remain connected to friends and family. Others may have trouble implementing behaviors that can help them manage pain, such as taking required medications, pacing their activities, or eating a balanced diet. Psychological approaches to the treatment of pain can help individuals cope with emotional distress related to their experience of pain, re-engage in meaningful activities, and reduce their level of disability due to pain.

OVERVIEW OF COGNITIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is a form of talk therapy that has been shown to be effective for treating a wide range of mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, substance use, post-traumatic stress disorder, and insomnia. It has also been

demonstrated to be helpful for individuals with certain medical conditions, including chronic fatigue syndrome, irritable bowel syndrome, migraine headaches, and chronic pain. CBT is based on the idea that the way people perceive a situation is more closely related to their reaction than the situation itself.

CBT therapists help clients identify thoughts that are causing them distress and evaluate how accurate and helpful they are at the present time. When the therapist and client discover that a thought may not be entirely true, they work together to come up with a more accurate response. If it turns out that a thought is true, the therapist and client may decide that the thought is not helpful, and work together to arrive at a more helpful response. Or the therapist may help the client with problem-solving.

CBT therapists help clients recognize their strengths and values and set goals for treatment. They create an individualized treatment plan for each client, taking into account the client's culture, background, resources, aspirations, strengths, and values. Throughout treatment, they not only help clients evaluate their thoughts, but also teach them new skills that can help them as they pursue their goals and aspirations. Therapists may help clients learn relaxation, interpersonal skills, assertiveness skills, decision-making, mindfulness, anger management, techniques to manage cravings, and much more. They can help clients implement behaviors that promote good health and improve overall quality of life.

CBT treatment is designed to be time-limited—and many clients find that they start to feel even a little bit better after just a few sessions.



HOW DOES CBT FOR PAIN MANAGEMENT WORK?

If you decide to seek CBT treatment for pain, here's what to expect:

EDUCATION ABOUT PAIN

CBT therapists generally begin treatment by providing psychoeducation about pain. Your therapist will help you understand the complex nature of pain, and how biological, psychological, and social factors can influence your experience of pain. For many years, pain was seen as a physical or sensory problem—



your therapist will explain how we understand pain today, and how pain is processed in the nervous system as well as many different parts of the brain.

Understanding the basics of pain can help you and your therapist identify factors unique to you and your situation that either make your pain worse, or help you better cope with your pain experience. This information will help you and your therapist throughout treatment as you select techniques and learn new skills that can help you better manage your pain.

RELAXATION, STRESS REDUCTION, AND DISTRACTION

Strategies that have been shown to improve the experience of pain in the moment include

diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualization, and mindfulness. These strategies help reduce stress related to the experience of pain and promote relaxation. Like any other skill, these strategies take practice. It is best to practice regularly, especially when you are not currently experiencing pain, or when your pain levels are not at their highest.

Distraction is another technique that can help lessen the experience of pain. Research shows that focusing attention on the pain experience will amplify the severity of and suffering related to pain. Instead, you can practice gently turning your attention to other sensations by, for instance, holding an ice cube, listening to music, pointing to objects around you and naming them, counting objects, or naming colors. It is important to recognize that some strategies will work better than others for each individual. Your CBT therapist will collaborate with you in testing and selecting coping strategies that are right for you.

COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

Cognitive restructuring is a process CBT therapists use to help clients evaluate their thoughts about pain, their ability to manage it, and its impact on their lives. During this process, you and your therapist may identify thoughts that are unhelpful and can prevent you from effectively coping with your pain experience and its consequences. As a part of this process, your therapist will work with you to consider questions that will help you explore and, when needed, reframe your thoughts. For example, if you have the thought “I can’t handle the pain,” here are some questions your therapist might review with you:

- ***What is the evidence that your belief is true—that you can't handle any pain?***
- ***What is the evidence that, perhaps, your thought is not entirely true or not always true?***
- ***Considering all of the evidence, what is another way to think about your ability to handle pain?***
- ***What is the effect of telling yourself that “I can't handle the pain” over and over again? What could be the effect of telling yourself something different?***
- ***What would you tell a loved one if they were having this thought?***
- ***What would you like to do now?***

After responding to these questions and discussing the responses with your therapist, you may decide that a more accurate and helpful thought is: “My pain comes and goes. Sometimes it is very intense, but I’m learning strategies to help me take control of my pain. There are things I can do to cope better.”

Sometimes people have trouble believing a new thought, especially during a pain episode. Or they may intellectually understand that the thought is true but say that it just doesn’t “feel” true to them. Your CBT therapist will support you throughout the process of cognitive restructuring and may help you design an “experiment” to test your hypothesis about your pain. In the example above, you may implement some of the strategies you’ve learned to cope with your pain, recording your level of pain before and after implementing the strategies. These behavioral experiments can help you recognize on both an intellectual and emotional level that your new, more helpful belief is true.



ENHANCING WELL-BEING

There are many factors that have been demonstrated to contribute to an individual’s experience of pain, including poor sleep, inadequate nutrition, a sedentary lifestyle, loneliness, as well as the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances. You and your therapist will work together to identify any barriers to your well-being and effective coping with pain. Your therapist will offer you a choice of strategies and techniques from CBT for insomnia, lifestyle change, or substance use to help you address these concerns. They can help you examine thoughts and beliefs that may lead you to engage in unhelpful coping behaviors, teach you strategies for implementing new, more helpful habits, and enhance your motivation to maintain your new healthy habits long term.

LIVING A LIFE FULL OF MEANING AND PURPOSE

Often, when individuals experience pain, they may reduce their levels of activity, or change the types of activities they engage in. While this is a useful strategy in the short term, this coping approach typically leads to a poorer quality of life and increased suffering

in the long run. This is where clarification of your values and aspirations can be especially helpful. Your values are your long-standing beliefs about what is important in life, and what really matters to you. Your aspirations are your grand hopes for how you want your life to be. You and your therapist will work together to create a plan to live life more in line with your values, despite your pain experience, or participate in activities that bring you closer to achieving your aspirations. They can help you carry out these activities in small, manageable steps, ultimately demonstrating that you are in control of your life, as opposed to pain.

A person who values helping others may have given up their volunteer role with children because it was too strenuous and caused their pain to flare up. They may realize that there are other ways they can be of service, like volunteering for a crisis hotline, which they can do from home.

There are also activities that provide opportunities for feelings of pleasure or proficiency that you may be foregoing due to fear of pain flares, or beliefs about your ability to participate in these activities. Doing an activity in smaller controlled chunks or breaking an activity down into steps from easiest to hardest can help you engage in activities that lead to feelings of pleasure or proficiency. Cognitive restructuring can help you re-evaluate your beliefs about your ability to participate in activities or complete tasks.

CBT is an active form of therapy—clients are encouraged to make small changes in their thinking and behavior every day, and to practice newly learned skills and techniques both in session and between sessions. While

pain cannot always be eliminated, CBT helps clients improve their ability to manage pain and enhance the quality of their life.

If you are experiencing chronic pain, you may think that you need to wait for your pain to get better or go away before you can get back to your life. Thoughts like this are common, but CBT can help you cope with your pain and lead a more meaningful and enjoyable life—so why wait? You can take steps toward a better life today.

CBT RESOURCES

BECK INSTITUTE

The nonprofit [Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy](#) was established in 1994 by Dr. Aaron T. Beck and Dr. Judith S. Beck as a setting for state-of-the-art psychotherapy and professional training in CBT. Since its inception, Beck Institute has built exceptional in-person and online trainings in CBT, trained tens of thousands of professionals from around the world, and created a global community of CBT practitioners.

PSYCHOTHERAPY

Cognitive behavior therapists can help you identify, evaluate, and modify unhelpful thoughts about yourself, the world, the future, and other people. They can also help you figure out ways to more effectively manage day-to-day problems. With your effort and their guidance, you can learn skills to help you feel better and stay better. To learn more about clinical services at Beck Institute, or to search for a Beck Institute Certified CBT clinician in your location, visit our [Beck Institute Cares website](#).

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (US): 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Crisis Text Line: 741742

ONLINE RESOURCES:

- Learn how [CBT can help](#) with other conditions and common challenges.
- Visit [our Cares website](#) for articles, blogs, and multimedia resources about CBT.
- Read the [Beck Institute blog](#).
- Sign up for [our newsletter](#).
- Engage with Beck Institute on social media:



SUPPORT BECK INSTITUTE

Beck Institute is a 501(c)3 nonprofit with the mission of improving lives worldwide through excellence and innovation in Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Recovery-Oriented Cognitive Behavior Therapy.

[Help us continue our work](#) with a gift today!