

Introduction to CBT

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is both a form of psychological therapy, and a very helpful way of thinking about human experiences. It gives us a set of tools to break down people's problems in a way which leads us towards helpful solutions. The basic idea of CBT is simple but powerful: CBT says that what we think and do affects the way we feel.

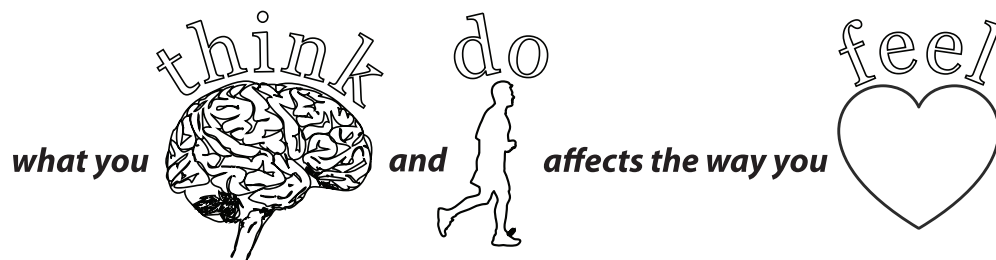


Figure 3: The basic message of CBT: What we think and do affects the way we feel.

The CBT model

CBT is interested in our thoughts, actions, and feelings. Any situation or problem can be broken down into four key parts:

- Thoughts – What was going through your mind?
- Emotions – How did you feel emotionally?
- Body sensations – What did you feel in your body?
- Behavior – What did you do? How did you react?

Importantly, each of these parts can affect any of the others.

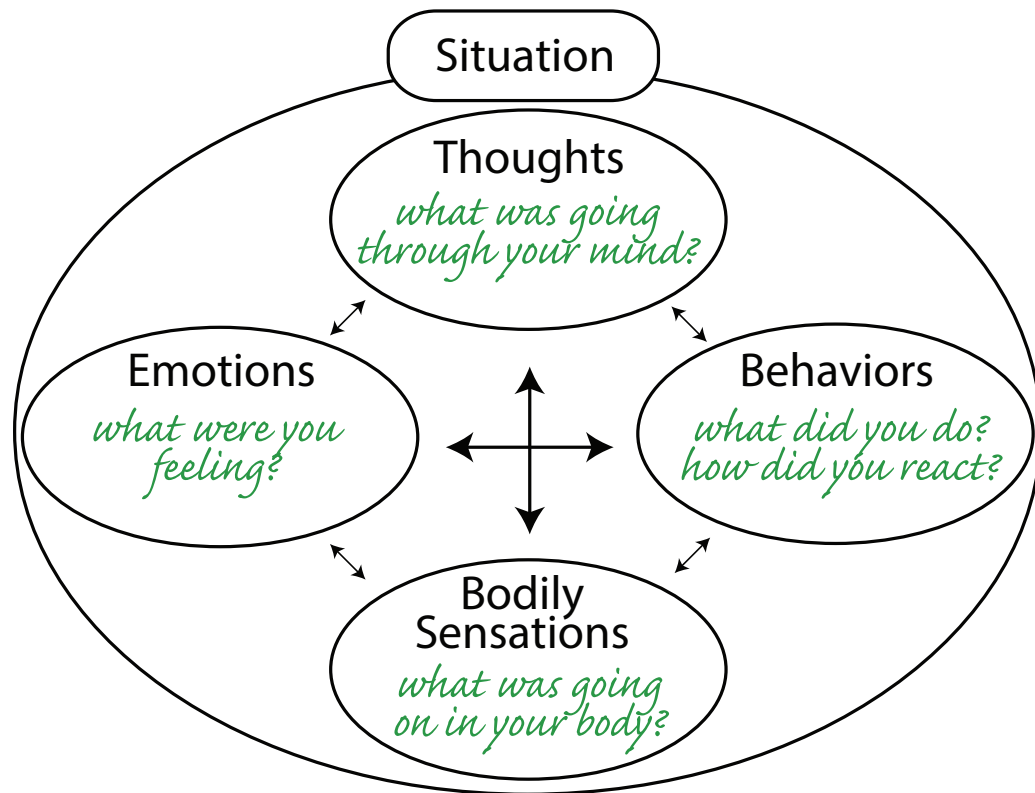


Figure 4: Any situation can be broken down into what was happening (situation), what we thought, what we felt (emotionally), what we felt in our bodies (physical sensations), and how we reacted (behaviors). Each of these things can affect any of the others.

Let's think of some examples. Suppose Ted hears a noise in the middle of the night. He thinks to himself *"It's a burglar – I'm being robbed!"*. He is immediately on alert and feeling frightened, and he feels his heart pound, his muscles tense, and his breathing get quicker. Ted starts looking for something to defend himself with.

Let's imagine that Ted reacts differently. Suppose a noise startles him awake in the middle of the night but this time he thinks to himself *"It's just the neighbourhood cats knocking things over in the alley"*. He does not feel any fear, and feels relaxed in his body. He turns over and goes back to sleep.

Notice how the same event, a noise in the middle of the night, can be interpreted in different ways. Different feelings and consequences flow from these different interpretations. This basic principle of CBT, that what we think affects the way we feel, has important consequences for how we react to any situation. This is especially true for situations in which we panic.

Throughout the rest of this book we will think about panic using this model. In the next sections we will look at the roles of thoughts, emotions, body sensations, and behaviors in panic.