

cognitive behavioral therapy christian perspective

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: A Christian Perspective

Introduction

Exploring the intersection of faith and mental well-being often leads us to valuable insights. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), a widely recognized and effective approach to addressing various mental health challenges, can be understood and practiced through a rich Christian lens. This article delves into how cognitive behavioral therapy, viewed from a Christian perspective, integrates core biblical principles with proven therapeutic techniques. We will examine how CBT's focus on thought patterns and behaviors aligns with Christian teachings on renewing the mind, overcoming sin, and cultivating godly character. Discover how understanding the connection between our thoughts, feelings, and actions can be a powerful tool for spiritual growth and emotional healing within a Christian framework. This exploration will provide a comprehensive overview of how faith and CBT can work synergistically to foster wholeness.

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Understanding Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a well-established form of psychotherapy that focuses on the interconnectedness of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. At its core, CBT posits that our interpretations of events, rather than the events themselves, often dictate our emotional responses and subsequent actions. It is a goal-oriented and problem-focused therapy, meaning it aims to identify specific issues and develop practical strategies to address them. CBT is highly collaborative, with the therapist and client working together as a team to understand the root causes of distress and to implement change. The efficacy of CBT has been demonstrated across a wide range of psychological disorders, including depression, anxiety disorders, phobias, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The fundamental principle of CBT is that by changing maladaptive thought patterns and learned behaviors, individuals can experience significant improvements in their emotional state and overall functioning. Therapists guide clients in identifying automatic negative thoughts (ANTs), challenging their validity, and replacing them with more realistic and balanced perspectives. Behavioral interventions, such as exposure therapy, behavioral activation, and skills training, are also integral components of CBT. These techniques aim to modify problematic behaviors and to foster the development of healthier coping mechanisms. The structured nature of CBT, often involving homework assignments between sessions, empowers individuals to actively participate in their own healing process.

Core Principles of CBT and Their Christian Parallels

Several core principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) find remarkable resonance within Christian theology and practice. Understanding these parallels can deepen an individual's engagement with CBT, framing it not just as a psychological tool but as a means of spiritual growth. The emphasis on thought patterns in CBT directly aligns with biblical injunctions concerning the mind and its transformation.

The Power of Thoughts and Beliefs

CBT highlights how our interpretations of situations shape our emotional and behavioral responses. Similarly, Scripture repeatedly stresses the importance of our thoughts. Philippians 4:8 encourages believers to focus on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy. This verse suggests a deliberate cultivation of the mind, choosing thoughts that are positive and God-honoring. Proverbs 23:7, often interpreted as "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he," underscores the profound influence of our internal dialogue on our character and actions.

Behavioral Change and Sanctification

CBT's focus on modifying behaviors to achieve desired outcomes mirrors the Christian concept of sanctification, the process of becoming more like Christ. The Bible calls believers to put off the old self and put on the new self, which is being renewed in the image of its Creator (Colossians 3:9-10). This involves actively choosing to refrain from sinful behaviors and actively pursuing righteous actions. The systematic approach of CBT in identifying and changing behaviors can be seen as a practical application of this spiritual discipline.

Cognitive Restructuring and Renewing the Mind

A cornerstone of CBT is cognitive restructuring, the process of identifying and challenging distorted or unhelpful thoughts. This aligns directly with the biblical concept of "renewing the mind" as described in Romans 12:2: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." This process involves actively

evaluating our thoughts against God's truth, discarding those that are contrary to His word, and embracing His perspective.

Goal Setting and Spiritual Disciplines

CBT often involves setting specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals for behavioral change. This practice can be paralleled with the Christian pursuit of spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, Bible study, and fasting, which are intentional actions undertaken to foster spiritual growth and achieve spiritual maturity. Setting goals within a Christian framework can involve seeking to honor God in all aspects of life and to develop Christ-like character.

Theological Foundations for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

While CBT is a secular therapeutic modality, its core principles can be deeply supported by Christian theological concepts. Understanding these foundations allows for a richer integration of faith and therapy, enhancing its effectiveness for individuals seeking both psychological and spiritual well-being. The Christian worldview provides a robust framework for understanding human nature, the origins of distress, and the path toward healing and transformation.

The Imago Dei and Human Value

The doctrine of the Imago Dei, the belief that humans are created in the image of God, affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. This perspective is fundamental to CBT's emphasis on self-acceptance and challenging self-criticism. From a Christian viewpoint, negative self-talk that devalues one's personhood is not only inaccurate but also contrary to God's loving creation. CBT's techniques for reframing negative self-perceptions can be understood as aligning with the truth of our identity in Christ.

The Nature of Sin and its Impact on Thoughts

Christian theology addresses the pervasive influence of sin on human nature, including our thought processes. The Fall introduced a corrupted way of thinking, leading to distorted perceptions and sinful desires. CBT's focus on identifying and challenging irrational or harmful thoughts can be seen as a practical approach to confronting the effects of sin on the mind. The concept of "taking captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5) underscores the spiritual warfare aspect of managing our thoughts.

The Sovereignty of God and Human Responsibility

A nuanced understanding of God's sovereignty and human responsibility is crucial in Christian CBT. While God is ultimately in control, believers are called to actively participate in their sanctification and healing. CBT's

emphasis on identifying personal thought patterns and behaviors and actively working to change them aligns with the biblical call for personal responsibility and diligent effort in living a godly life. This is not a contradiction but a harmonious interplay between divine grace and human agency.

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Transformation

The Christian faith recognizes the indwelling Holy Spirit as the agent of transformation. The Holy Spirit empowers believers to overcome sin, renew their minds, and live according to God's will. In the context of CBT, the Holy Spirit can be seen as the divine resource that enables individuals to effectively implement CBT strategies, to discern truth from error in their thinking, and to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit, such as self-control and peace.

Applying CBT Techniques from a Christian Perspective

Integrating Christian principles with CBT techniques can provide a uniquely powerful approach to mental and emotional healing. This approach doesn't replace faith but rather enhances it, using therapeutic tools to live out biblical truths more effectively. The application of CBT within a Christian framework focuses on aligning thought patterns and behaviors with God's Word and His will.

Identifying and Challenging Unbiblical Thoughts

A key CBT skill is identifying automatic negative thoughts (ANTs). From a Christian perspective, this involves scrutinizing these thoughts against the backdrop of Scripture. For example, if someone experiences persistent thoughts of worthlessness, a Christian CBT approach would involve challenging this by recalling biblical affirmations of identity in Christ, such as being a beloved child of God (1 John 3:1). This reframing process aligns with the biblical mandate to renew the mind.

Behavioral Activation and Godly Living

Behavioral activation, a CBT technique to combat depression by increasing engagement in positive activities, can be enhanced by a Christian focus. Instead of simply engaging in enjoyable activities, the emphasis can be on activities that honor God, serve others, or contribute to spiritual growth. This might include volunteering, participating in church ministries, or spending time in prayer and worship. These actions not only combat negative emotions but also align with the biblical call to love God and love our neighbor.

Developing Coping Skills Through Prayer and Scripture

CBT teaches various coping strategies for managing distress. Within a Christian framework, these strategies are often prayerfully considered and

biblically informed. For instance, when faced with anxiety, instead of solely relying on deep breathing exercises, an individual might combine this with praying Scripture verses that speak of God's peace and presence, such as Philippians 4:6-7.

Goal Setting for Spiritual Growth

CBT's goal-setting principles can be applied to spiritual development. This might involve setting goals related to consistent Bible reading, increased prayerfulness, or demonstrating Christ-like love in relationships. The therapeutic process can help identify the cognitive and behavioral barriers to achieving these spiritual goals and develop strategies to overcome them. For example, if a goal is to be more patient, CBT techniques can help identify triggers for impatience and develop alternative responses.

Thought Stopping and Replacement with Truth

Thought stopping is a technique where an individual mentally halts an intrusive, unwanted thought. In a Christian context, this is often followed by replacing the thought with a biblical truth or affirmation. For instance, if a person is experiencing a fearful thought, they might mentally say "Stop!" and then replace it with a verse like "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 27:1).

Addressing Common Mental Health Challenges with Christian CBT

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, when viewed through a Christian lens, offers a powerful and integrated approach to addressing a wide spectrum of mental health challenges. The synergy between therapeutic principles and biblical truths can lead to profound and lasting healing. This perspective acknowledges the reality of spiritual warfare and the transformative power of God's grace in the healing process.

Depression from a Christian Perspective

Depression can often involve negative thought patterns about oneself, the world, and the future, which are contrary to God's promises of hope and redemption. Christian CBT helps individuals identify these distorted beliefs, such as "I am a failure" or "God has abandoned me," and replace them with biblical truths about their identity in Christ, God's unfailing love, and His sovereign plan. Behavioral activation, focusing on activities that honor God and foster community, is also crucial in combating the lethargy associated with depression.

Anxiety and Fear Through Faith

Anxiety and fear are often rooted in a lack of trust in God's provision and control. CBT techniques for managing anxiety, such as identifying and challenging catastrophic thinking, are enhanced by a Christian focus on faith and reliance on God. Instead of solely focusing on coping mechanisms,

individuals are encouraged to meditate on God's promises of peace and protection, praying for His strength to overcome fear. Verses like Philippians 4:7, "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus," become powerful tools.

Overcoming Anger and Bitterness

Unresolved anger and bitterness can stem from distorted interpretations of events and perceived injustices. Christian CBT helps individuals examine their thought processes related to anger, identify the underlying beliefs, and apply biblical principles of forgiveness and grace. The process involves understanding that while offenses may occur, a Christ-like response involves releasing the offense to God and choosing forgiveness, even when it is difficult. This aligns with Jesus' command to love one's enemies.

Dealing with Guilt and Shame

Guilt and shame can be debilitating, often stemming from past actions or perceived failures. While CBT can address the thought patterns contributing to these feelings, a Christian perspective offers the ultimate antidote: the atonement of Christ. Christian CBT helps individuals differentiate between godly sorrow that leads to repentance and unproductive guilt or shame. It emphasizes God's forgiveness through Christ, the cleansing power of His blood, and the truth that in Him, believers are made new creations, free from condemnation (Romans 8:1).

Addressing Addictive Behaviors

Addictive behaviors often involve compulsive thoughts and actions that override healthier choices. CBT techniques can help individuals identify triggers, develop coping strategies, and practice abstinence. From a Christian viewpoint, this process is strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome fleshly desires and the understanding that true freedom is found in Christ. Fellowship within a Christian community can provide support and accountability, further aiding in recovery.

The Role of Prayer and Scripture in Christian CBT

The integration of prayer and Scripture is what distinguishes Christian Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) from its secular counterpart. These spiritual disciplines are not merely add-ons but are foundational elements that infuse the therapeutic process with divine power and biblical truth. They provide a unique framework for understanding and addressing mental and emotional struggles.

Prayer as a Tool for Cognitive Reframing

Prayer is a direct communication with God, and in the context of Christian CBT, it serves as a vital tool for cognitive reframing. When individuals

encounter negative or unbiblical thoughts, they are encouraged to bring these thoughts to God in prayer. This involves asking for His perspective, seeking His wisdom, and surrendering the thoughts to His control. Praying Scripture passages that counter negative thinking patterns can also be incredibly effective. For example, praying verses about God's love and acceptance can help challenge thoughts of worthlessness.

Scripture as the Source of Truth and Guidance

The Bible is considered the authoritative Word of God, providing the ultimate truth about God, humanity, and life. In Christian CBT, Scripture serves as the benchmark against which all thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors are evaluated. When identifying irrational or distorted thoughts, individuals are guided to compare them with biblical teachings. For instance, thoughts of despair can be countered with verses that speak of hope in Christ, such as Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Meditating on God's Word for Transformation

Meditation on Scripture, a practice encouraged in Christian CBT, involves actively reflecting on biblical passages, allowing their truths to penetrate the mind and heart. This process is akin to the cognitive restructuring aspect of CBT, where distorted thoughts are replaced with more accurate and God-honoring ones. By consistently meditating on God's Word, individuals can gradually transform their thinking patterns, aligning them with God's will and promoting emotional well-being.

Prayer for Strength and Discernment

Applying CBT techniques can be challenging, especially when confronting deeply ingrained thought patterns. Prayer provides the necessary strength and discernment to navigate these challenges. Believers are encouraged to pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance in identifying false thoughts, for the courage to challenge them, and for the resilience to implement behavioral changes. This reliance on God for strength is a core tenet of Christian living and a vital component of effective Christian CBT.

Community and Corporate Prayer

While individual prayer is paramount, Christian CBT also recognizes the importance of community and corporate prayer. Sharing struggles with trusted Christian friends, mentors, or within a small group can provide support, encouragement, and accountability. Praying together for healing and breakthrough amplifies the power of prayer and strengthens the individual's resolve in their therapeutic journey.

Overcoming Obstacles and Building Resilience

Through Christian CBT

Engaging in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) from a Christian perspective, while immensely beneficial, may present unique challenges. However, by leveraging faith-based principles and practices, individuals can effectively navigate these obstacles and build robust resilience, fostering enduring mental and spiritual well-being. The Christian understanding of overcoming adversity is deeply rooted in trust and reliance on God.

Dealing with Spiritual Discouragement

During the process of change, individuals might experience spiritual discouragement, feeling like progress is slow or that old patterns are returning. Christian CBT addresses this by reminding individuals of God's faithfulness and the ongoing nature of sanctification. It encourages leaning on the Holy Spirit for strength and perseverance, recalling biblical accounts of perseverance through trials, such as those found in the lives of Old Testament figures or the Apostle Paul. Trusting in God's timing and His ultimate victory is key.

Challenging Deeply Ingrained Negative Beliefs

Some negative thought patterns are deeply ingrained, often stemming from past trauma or life experiences. Christian CBT acknowledges the difficulty of uprooting these beliefs. The process involves a combination of consistent cognitive restructuring, prayer for healing and release, and sometimes, seeking specialized counseling for deeper issues. The truth of Christ's redemptive power provides the ultimate hope for overcoming even the most persistent negative beliefs.

Maintaining Faith Amidst Psychological Distress

Periods of intense psychological distress can test faith. Christian CBT emphasizes that faith is not the absence of doubt or struggle, but rather the continued trust in God even when circumstances are difficult. It encourages individuals to remember God's past faithfulness in their lives and to hold onto biblical promises. Active engagement in spiritual disciplines, even when motivation is low, can help maintain a connection to God and prevent faith from faltering.

Building a God-Centered Support System

A strong support system is crucial for resilience. In the context of Christian CBT, this support system should ideally be God-centered. This includes fostering relationships with fellow believers who can offer encouragement, accountability, and prayer. Church communities, small groups, and Christian mentors can provide invaluable support, reminding individuals that they are not alone in their struggles and that God is with them.

Practicing Grace and Self-Compassion

Christian CBT encourages a balance of accountability and grace. While it's important to take responsibility for one's thoughts and behaviors, it's also essential to extend self-compassion, recognizing that growth is a process. The biblical concept of God's grace, which is unmerited favor, should extend to how individuals treat themselves. This involves understanding that imperfections are part of the journey and that God's love is not dependent on perfect performance.

Conclusion: Wholeness Through Faith and CBT

In conclusion, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), when approached from a Christian perspective, offers a powerful and holistic pathway to mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. By integrating the proven techniques of CBT with core biblical principles, individuals can effectively identify and transform negative thought patterns, unhealthy behaviors, and distorted beliefs. The Christian framework provides a rich understanding of human value as created in the Imago Dei, the impact of sin on the mind, and the transformative power of God's grace and the Holy Spirit. Applying CBT through the lens of faith allows believers to not only address psychological distress but also to deepen their relationship with God, cultivate Christ-like character, and experience genuine spiritual growth. Embracing this integrated approach fosters a resilience built on divine truth and a wholeness that encompasses the entirety of one's being, bringing glory to God in the process.

Frequently Asked Questions

How can CBT be integrated with a Christian worldview to address anxiety?

A Christian perspective on CBT for anxiety often involves identifying and challenging anxious thought patterns (e.g., 'God doesn't care about me') by replacing them with Bible-based truths (e.g., 'The Lord is near to the brokenhearted'). This can include prayer, scripture meditation, and focusing on God's promises as antidotes to worry. The therapeutic relationship itself can be seen as reflecting God's love and support.

What are some common cognitive distortions addressed in CBT from a Christian viewpoint?

Common distortions can include 'all-or-nothing thinking' (e.g., 'If I'm not perfect, I'm a failure'), 'catastrophizing' (e.g., 'If this bad thing happens, it's the end of the world'), and 'personalization' (e.g., 'Everything is my fault'). From a Christian perspective, these are countered by recognizing God's grace, understanding that perfection is achieved in Christ, and acknowledging that we are not solely responsible for all outcomes.

Can CBT help with overcoming sinful thought patterns from a Christian standpoint?

Yes, CBT can be highly effective. From a Christian perspective, it involves identifying the thoughts and triggers that lead to sinful behavior, challenging the validity and morality of these thoughts based on biblical principles, and replacing them with thoughts aligned with God's will. This often includes confession, repentance, and actively choosing to think about things that are 'true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable' (Philippians 4:8).

How does the concept of 'grace' fit into CBT for Christians?

Grace is central. CBT can help Christians understand that they don't have to earn God's favor or their own worth through perfect behavior or thought. It allows for self-compassion, recognizing that mistakes and struggles are opportunities for growth and learning, not condemnation. A Christian therapist can help clients embrace God's unconditional love and forgiveness.

What role does prayer play in a Christian-informed CBT approach?

Prayer is a powerful tool. It can be used to seek God's wisdom in identifying distorted thoughts, to ask for strength to change behaviors, and to express dependence on God. Praying scripture or meditating on God's word can be integrated as a way to directly confront and reframe negative thinking patterns with divine truth.

How does CBT, from a Christian perspective, help with feelings of guilt or shame?

CBT can help Christians distinguish between conviction (Godly sorrow leading to repentance) and condemnation (unhealthy guilt and shame). By examining the thoughts behind guilt, a Christian can then turn to scripture and the assurance of forgiveness through Christ. This involves understanding that while sin has consequences, forgiveness is readily available, freeing them from the weight of shame.

Are there specific biblical verses that are particularly useful in a Christian CBT framework?

Absolutely. Verses like Romans 12:2 ('Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind') are foundational for cognitive restructuring. Philippians 4:8 ('Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things') guides thought content. Also, verses about God's love and sovereignty are crucial for emotional regulation.

How can CBT help Christians process difficult emotions like anger or depression, with a theological

underpinning?

From a Christian perspective, CBT helps explore the thoughts driving anger or depression. This might involve examining beliefs about fairness, control, or personal value. Theologically, the approach would then involve aligning these thoughts with biblical teachings on forgiveness, reliance on God for strength, the hope found in Christ, and the understanding that suffering can be redemptive and shared with a compassionate God.

What are the ethical considerations when a Christian therapist uses CBT?

Ethical considerations include maintaining professional boundaries, ensuring that faith integration is client-led and not imposed, respecting the client's autonomy, and ensuring that the integration enhances, rather than compromises, evidence-based therapeutic practice. The therapist must also have a strong understanding of both CBT principles and Christian theology to ensure a cohesive and helpful approach.

Can CBT, with a Christian lens, be used to improve relationships, such as marital or parent-child dynamics?

Yes. CBT helps individuals identify and challenge negative thought patterns about their loved ones (e.g., 'My spouse never listens to me'). From a Christian perspective, this is coupled with biblical principles of love, forgiveness, communication, and submission to one another. This can lead to more empathetic interactions, better conflict resolution, and a deeper understanding of unconditional love within relationships.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) from a Christian perspective:

1. *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* by Nancy Leigh DeMoss Wolgemuth. This book explores the biblical principle of focusing on Christ and serving others rather than obsessing over oneself. It offers practical guidance for overcoming self-centeredness, anxiety, and pride, which are common targets of CBT. By redirecting attention outward, readers can experience greater peace and fulfillment in their faith.
2. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Truth, Love, and Grace of Christ* by Timothy Keller. While primarily about marriage, this book delves deeply into understanding our core beliefs and how they shape our behavior, a key aspect of CBT. Keller uses a theological framework to address issues like sin, self-deception, and the struggle for transformation within relationships. It offers a biblically informed approach to changing destructive patterns of thought and action.
3. *When I Don't Feel Like It: Finding Faith Over Feelings* by Tyler Staton. This book addresses the common struggle of letting emotions dictate actions, a central theme in CBT's focus on cognitive restructuring. Staton offers a Spirit-empowered perspective on overcoming apathy and discouragement by anchoring faith in God's promises, not fleeting feelings. It encourages

intentional action aligned with biblical truth, even when emotions are contrary.

4. *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. This classic spiritual work emphasizes the power of conscious awareness of God's presence throughout daily life. It aligns with CBT's emphasis on mindfulness and redirecting attention, but from a deeply devotional Christian standpoint. By cultivating a continuous conversation with God, readers can transform their thoughts and experiences.

5. *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel. While apologetic in nature, Strobel's methodical investigation into the evidence for Jesus Christ reflects a rational, evidence-based approach to belief. This aligns with CBT's cognitive restructuring, encouraging a critical examination of one's thoughts and assumptions. It provides a framework for strengthening faith through reasoned inquiry, which can impact negative thought patterns.

6. *The Surprising Power of Simply Saying Yes: Discovering Joy in the Gospel of Grace* by Melissa B. McDonald. This book encourages a joyful embrace of God's grace, which can be a powerful counterpoint to the negative self-talk often addressed by CBT. It explores how accepting God's affirmation can reshape our identity and lead to positive behavioral changes. The focus on God's "yes" to us helps reframe internal dialogue.

7. *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. This allegorical novel depicts a spiritual journey filled with internal struggles and external challenges, mirroring the process of personal transformation. The protagonist, Christian, grapples with doubts, fears, and temptations, and his progress is often achieved through overcoming his own mental and spiritual obstacles. It offers a narrative illustration of confronting and conquering destructive thought patterns through faith.

8. *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts* by Jerry Bridges. This book directly addresses the biblical foundations for faith and reliance on God, which is essential for challenging and changing negative or anxious thinking patterns. Bridges provides practical and theological insights into how to entrust our worries and circumstances to God. It offers a Christian perspective on developing resilience and peace by aligning our thoughts with God's sovereignty.

9. *Anger: Wisdom for Managing God's Greatest Gift* by Gary Thomas. This book examines anger from a biblical perspective, offering a framework for understanding and transforming destructive expressions of this emotion. Thomas encourages readers to reframe their understanding of anger and to develop healthier ways of responding to provocations. It provides practical, faith-based strategies for cognitive and behavioral change related to anger management.

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