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BY RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

MALINI Bose was overjoyed when her 18-year-old son was accepted in one of the best colleges in UK, but that joy was clouded by the knowledge of his departure. When he left home, Malini was unable to deal with the separation and this triggered her descent into the doldrums. She stopped eating, lost 7 kg and suffered frequent panic attacks. Anti-depressants and counselling had absolutely no effect. "The medication had no effect on me whatsoever and during counselling sessions I would be talking endlessly about my life, my childhood and my marriage." At this stage her therapist recommended cognitive behavior therapy. "Once I began this, things began to make sense. My new therapist immediately attacked the problem caused by my son's departure and helped me solve it," she says.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) works by simply changing the way you look at a situation and is based on the theory that it's not events that upset us, but the meanings we give them. This is especially helpful for people suffering from depression, anger management problems, relationship issues and psychosomatic ailments such as IBS (irritable bowel syndrome), hypochondria or eating disorders. This therapy is not, however, for those with severe psychological problems like schizophrenia.

Replace the negative thought

The first principle of cognitive therapy is that all your moods are created by your 'cognitions' or thoughts. Cognition refers to the way you look at things — your perceptions, mental attitudes and beliefs. It includes the way you interpret things — what you say about something of someone to yourself. You feel the way you do right now because of the thought you are thinking at this moment.

Cognitive therapy is the first form of psychotherapy that has been shown in clinical research studies to be as effective as and in some cases more effective than antidepressant drug therapy in the treatment of severe and mild depression. The word 'cognitive' simply refers to how you are thinking and feeling about things at a particular moment, and the therapy is based on the following assumptions:

- When you are depressed or anxious, you are thinking in an illogical, negative manner and inadvertently act in a self-defeating way.
- With some effort you can train yourself to straighten your twisted thought patterns.
- As your painful symptoms are eliminated, you will become productive and happy again, and will respect yourself.
- These aims can usually be accomplished in a relatively brief period of time, using straightforward methods.

Malini found it easy enough to use this method "I was asked to read '10 steps to positive thinking' — which was an eye opener. Every day I had to keep a diary of my thoughts and note down what triggered a negative reaction. Then my therapist and I went through this diary during our sessions and discussed my reactions and how to change them," she explains.

Through this process, she learned to focus on the negative thoughts and the feelings and quickly convert these into a positive version.

Practical method

CBT adopts a highly practical approach to problem solving and is different from other forms of psychotherapy because it is a structured, time bound and goal oriented therapy. "Cognitive behavior therapy focuses on our thoughts, images, beliefs and attitudes and how these affect our behavior and the way we deal with emotional problems. It aims to change the patterns of thinking or behaviour that cause people's difficulties, and ultimately change the way they feel," says Swati Kashyap Sharma, a senior consultant, Behavioural medicine, Fortis La Femme. Unlike some other 'talking' treatments, CBT focuses on the "here and now". Unlike other forms of behavioural therapy, the therapist is able to pinpoint the problem right in the beginning, and endless sessions of talking and regressing into the past to analyse the experiences of childhood

is not required. "The focus is on the present instead of the past. CBT is one of the most popular forms of therapy in the school of psychotherapy and combines mental exercises with behavioural tasks," says Dr Sujata Sharma, behavioural therapist.

Changes perception

CBT as a therapy goes a step above other therapies which concentrate on changing only behavior and focuses on the thinking instead. The problem need not be the result of a deep rooted childhood problem and a long session of analyzing past experiences is not necessary. "Cognitive behavioral therapy grew out of and in retaliation to behaviorally concerned with the thoughts and feelings that are so obviously important in all psychiatric disorders," says Dr Samir Parikh, senior psychiatrist, Max Hospital. CBT originated in the 1960s when a US psychiatrist and psychotherapist called Aaron T.

Beck observed that his patients tended to have an 'internal dialogue' going on in their minds, almost as if they were talking to themselves. He realised that thoughts triggered feelings and that people could learn to become aware of their thoughts and how these created their feelings. If a person was feeling upset in some way, the thoughts were usually negative and neither realistic nor helpful. Identifying these thoughts was the key to the patient understanding and overcoming his or her difficulties. This technique was called cognitive therapy because of the importance it places on thinking. It's now known as CBT because the therapy employs behavioural techniques as well, which corrects the actions that follow feelings.

It's upto you

Working on homework assignments between sessions by keeping a diary of feelings and actions is a vital part of the process. "We ask the person to keep a diary to help them to identify their individual patterns of thoughts, emo-

tions, bodily feelings and actions. Together, the patient and the therapist examine the thoughts, feelings and behaviour to work out if they are unrealistic or unhelpful and how they affect each other, and patient," says Dr Sujata Sharma, behavioural therapist. Once this work has been done, the therapist helps the patient work out how to change unhelpful thoughts and behaviours.

It works quickly

What is good about this therapy is that once a person understands how much power they have over their own thoughts and learn that they are responsible and capable of changing these, they can use this method by themselves throughout their lives. "The generation of insight within the patient which includes an awareness of the problem as well as the difficulties being generated by it in various spheres of life such as home, work, socializing etc, helps bring about quick changes," says Dr Parikh. Since the person seeking change is ultimately responsi-

Altering your mood is easy once you learn to use cognitive therapy to help you change your perception of the people and events in your lives and acquire a positive view of everything

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ble for his own recovery, it is important for a counsellor to decide whether or not his patient is capable of assuming a proactive role in his own change. "We counsel the patient prior to beginning the therapy so that we can gauge his ability to follow our instructions," says Dr Swati. "Studies have shown that CBT has been effective in reducing the recurrence of depression by 33 per cent. Malini was off anti-depressants in a month's time and was absolutely fine four months into her therapy. It's been a year now and she is a very positive person now," she concludes.

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IS YOUR THINKING DISTORTED?

All or nothing thinking: You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect you see yourself as a failure.

Over-generalisation: You see a single negative event as a never ending pattern of defeat.

Mental filter: You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it so that your vision of reality becomes darkened, like a single drop of ink in a glass of water.

Disqualifying the positive: You reject positive experiences by insisting they don't count for some reason or the other.

Jumping to conclusions: You instinctively make a negative interpretation of a situation without any basis.



Behavioural therapist Dr Swati

Magnification or minimization: You exaggerate the importance of events (such as your goof up) or you inappropriately shrink things (like your own desirable qualities)

Emotional reasoning: You assume your negative emotions reflect the way the things are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."