

CHANGING BEHAVIOR

By Stan Abramski, MD, Psychiatrist, Overlake Behavioral Health Services

All of us face stressful situations and challenging periods in our lives. Some challenges we face are true crisis events. At other times, we may not be able to point to a specific cause of our concern. Many people take life's highs and lows in stride. But others get stuck at a low point. These feelings can lead to depression, isolation, feelings of low self-worth, and even feelings of suicide. It's important to know how to change our thinking and our behavior so that we can manage our moods and maintain a healthy emotional equilibrium.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a form of psychotherapy that we use with many of our clients. It is based on the idea that our mindset can color our feelings, actions and perceptions of people and events. This type of therapy has proven to be very effective in treating mood disorders. Cognitive behavioral therapies are designed to help teach patients how they can objectively evaluate and incrementally modify their behaviors and, ultimately, their feelings. They focus on gradually helping patients be more proactive rather than reactive, and, consequently, patients become more empowered.

One of the first exercises we ask patients to complete is to put the events in their lives into two stacks: what you can control and what you can't. This often eliminates a great source of stress right away as people are reminded to focus on only those elements in their lives they can control. Soon, people recognize the only things they can control are their own responses to life events.

Managing our moods, thoughts and behavior takes effort. Many people want an easy and immediate solution to emotional problems—a medication or pill that will alleviate their emotional distress and make it easier to deal with the natural ups and downs of life. Medication is a contributing factor for some in treating issues of mental health. But most helpful is learning to change behavior so that you can naturally care for your mental health.

The following are some of the techniques we recommend to patients.

**Frame your life in positive terms.**

Most people are adept at self-criticism. But instead of focusing on what's going wrong in your life, focus on what's going right.

**Aim for balance.** When patients are feeling stressed out or overwhelmed, we ask them what they love to do. Often, we find that they've pushed aside their favorite pastimes or hobbies to focus on career, finances, health or the needs of others. While we all have responsibilities to attend, we must make time for those pursuits that bring joy to our lives.

**Reach out for help.** If you're feeling depressed, it's easy to isolate yourself, but this only compounds the problem. Sharing your troubles releases the stress of shouldering a burden alone. When we hold in stressful feelings, we allow circular thinking, and many times the problem only festers and gains momentum.

**Set achievable, worthwhile goals.** Many people set unrealistic expectations of themselves. It's important to think big, but shoot for what is both realistic and rewarding. Remember that satisfaction from material objects is fleeting. We urge patients to dig deeper in order to find what is truly gratifying and lasting.

**Get good sleep.** Sleep is important for overall health and well-being, especially if you're feeling less than 100 percent. One way to get better sleep is to think of three things you're grateful for before falling asleep. This almost ensures positive dreams and better-quality sleep. It is helpful to use relaxation CDs and white noise to block out ambient noise. Also, limiting caffeine and alcohol intake will help you sleep.

Changing behavior isn't easy. It takes patience and practice. It's natural for human beings to follow the path of least resistance and fall into old patterns of undesirable behavior. That's why it's important to build your network of support, talk about your concerns and seek help from a professional.

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