



Somerset
NHS Foundation Trust

Cognitive analytic therapy (CAT)



Adult Community Mental Health Service
Patient information

Kindness, Respect, Teamwork
Everyone, Every day

What is cognitive analytic therapy?

Cognitive analytic therapy, also known as CAT, is a talking therapy that mainly focuses on how we relate to ourselves and to other people.

It is based on the idea that as children we cope with difficult situations by developing strategies to manage them. These strategies (patterns of how we think, feel and act) help us to cope when we are young but if we continue to use them (even when they are no longer needed) as adults we may become stuck in these patterns and come to feel they are now problems themselves.

Often we aren't conscious of these thought patterns or what is happening in our brain and body as a result of them. This can have an impact on our relationship with ourself and others. It can also impact on our expectation of how other people may act or behave towards us.

For example, if you had learned in your childhood that you only received love and care by pleasing others you might believe that you will only be liked by doing what others want. This puts you in a trap of pleasing others and can lead to you feeling used and hurt.

Seeing the same unhelpful patterns can be hard and may lead to:

- repeatedly feeling let down, hurt or rejected
- experiencing depression, anxiety or low self-esteem
- avoiding things
- struggling to be assertive and standing up for yourself
- getting into difficult situations again and again

- feeling as though the way you act or feel is constantly changing
- not being able to trust your own decisions
- struggling to trust others or develop healthy attachments or good friendships.

CAT helps you learn new ways to think about yourself and others and helps you make better choices.

How can CAT help me?

CAT is a collaborative therapy and tailored to your own personal need. It will involve working together with a therapist to:

- look more closely at patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving, to clarify which ones are helpful or unhelpful
- understand the effect; why they developed and why you needed them
- start to develop more helpful patterns and develop a better relationship with yourself and others.

The aim is to reduce the distress you experience in your relationships with others, and with yourself.

What preparation is needed?

You do not need to prepare for this therapy. But it might help to think about your main problems and what you want to achieve from therapy.

To get the most out of CAT, you need to attend regular weekly appointments. Studies show that coming to appointments regularly is important for getting good results from the therapy.

What happens at the first appointment?

The therapist will ask you why you are seeking therapy and talk to you about what this involves. This first session gives you the opportunity to:

- find out if CAT is likely to be helpful for you
- decide if you are happy to work with the therapist
- ask any questions you may have about the therapy.

What does the therapy involve?

After the first session you will be asked to complete a questionnaire or psychotherapy file asking you what problems or patterns you commonly experience. You may also be given things to help monitor your mood or behaviour patterns.

Early therapy sessions will involve hearing your story and trying to understand if some of your problems started in your childhood. The therapist does not need to know every detail and will go at your pace.

Together with your therapist, you will start to understand the patterns that keep you feeling stuck. Your therapist will write, with you, a letter describing your story and your patterns, to help you choose what you want to focus on in the therapy.

You will work together to develop diagrams or “maps” that show both the bad patterns and the good ones. This will involve thinking about the relationship you have with:

- yourself
- your therapist
- other people in your life.

The rest of the therapy is about trying to recognise and change the patterns that are causing problems.

You and your therapist exchange a “goodbye” letter at the end of the therapy. This will reflect on the therapy, how you feel about this ending and looking to the future.

How long does it last?

CAT is a time limited therapy. You and your therapist will agree how many sessions are being offered at the beginning of your therapy. This is between 8, 16 and where appropriate 24 sessions could be considered.

Appointments are weekly and last for 50 minutes.

What follow-up is needed?

You will normally be offered a follow-up appointment in 2 to 3 months. If you have had a 24 session CAT, you may be offered a few more follow up sessions to ease out of the therapy a little more slowly.

The follow-up is to review how things have gone for you after therapy has finished. There maybe occasions where a follow-up is not required, and this would be discussed with your therapist.

What are the benefits?

CAT can't undo painful experiences in the past that have led to difficulties. But it can help you feel you have more control over patterns of self-care, self-harm and relationships with others. It can also help you to make positive changes for the future.

People that have had CAT have described it as a journey of self discovery. Many write about feeling uncertain initially and many have found it life changing, in terms of how they see and understand themselves better.

We hope that you will:

- be able to better tolerate or understand your feelings in the context of past and current relationships, including your relationship with yourself
- you will develop tools (such as letters, diagrams) that will help you understand yourself and give you a clearer understanding of your problematic patterns and the healthy parts of yourself
- working together with your therapist allows you to feel your voice/opinion is heard
- be supported by your therapist to help develop a positive therapeutic relationship.

This can help you feel you have more control in patterns of self-care, self-harm and relationships with others. It can also help you to make positive changes.

What are the risks?

As with any talking therapy, focusing on your problems can make you feel a bit worse at first before you feel better. This is because you are thinking a lot about them. Your therapist can help you understand why this happens.

Making changes in your relationships that are better for you might be confusing or hard for the people close to you. Therapy can be a strong experience, and the relationship you build with your therapist can feel very important.

Finishing therapy can make you have strong feelings, which is why CAT takes the ending very seriously. Your therapist will help you understand these feelings and deal with them as they come up.

What service users think of CAT

“There are lots of things I will take away from our time in these sessions. I have learned lots of things about myself from you. Learning about the reciprocal roles [patterns in relations] I play out, has helped me to see these more clearly with greater awareness. What perhaps has the most impact on my relationship with the past, is the writing, talking and sharing of the traumatic ‘stuff’ I experienced years ago, and the confidence you gave me to do so.”

“When I was offered the opportunity to have CAT therapy I was convinced there was nothing left that could help me, but I agreed to come along as I thought I had nothing left to lose. Little did I know that it would completely transform my life. I found the start incredibly difficult as I began to revisit different areas of my life and as a result felt more unstable initially. But with patience and understanding from my therapist I slowly started to grow, and it wasn’t long before I looked forward to sessions and turned up each week because I wanted to be there and not because I was expected to.”

“I think I will feel a lot of sadness when we part after our final session, but I also have a feeling that the journey will continue, and you will always be a part of that. I no longer feel so daunted by the prospect of having to look after myself as I have a better sense of where I am and what I need. I also have a better sense of who I am and how important it is to acknowledge that and to not lose myself in trying to accommodate others. I think I still have a lot to learn about meeting my needs but equally feel that I have made a lot of progress.”

Where can I find more information?

You can also find more information online at www.acat.me.uk



If you are currently accessing community mental health services, you can talk to your named keyworker or doctor involved in your care.

If you are interested in reading more about CAT then we recommend:

‘Change for the Better’ (5th edition) by Elizabeth Wilde McCormick.

This is a guide for real people living and struggling in real life. It is full of humane, creative compassion for those who would like to change. The Fifth Edition is a popular, practical guide for therapists and clients which describes in ordinary language how learned patterns of response contribute to psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, phobia, and relationship difficulty.

What to do next

CAT is currently available as part of the treatments offered in the community mental health service which includes Open Mental Health.

CAT is offered by CAT therapists and other mental health professionals training in CAT under weekly supervision.

If you are currently receiving treatment in our services, you can discuss this with your key worker.

If you are a mental health practitioner who would like to consider this as a potential treatment option, please speak with a CAT therapist within your local team or contact the CAT lead.



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All our sites are smokefree

MH/SPI/CAT/FEB25 - review FEB28

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