

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Why consider psychological therapy ?

Atrial Fibrillation is the most common heart rhythm condition and can impose a considerable impact on an individual's quality of life. AF can be an unpredictable and stressful condition, with potentially serious complications. It is not unusual for people with AF to need several medical appointments, various tests and a number of different treatment approaches. Any of these can leave people feeling worried. We are all different, and while in some people AF is not debilitating, for others it can be a disabling condition and so foster feelings of frustration. People with AF can experience significant levels of psychological distress about intrusive and sometimes frightening symptoms (palpitations, dizziness, breathlessness), losses and changes in roles (work, health, activities...) and challenges to self confidence and sense of being healthy. Many patients with AF experience troubling anxiety with worry and fear associated with their symptoms. Some suffer from panic while others can become frustrated or depressed.

How is CBT beneficial?

People respond in different ways to AF, for some it may be helpful to have a psychological perspective which has often been shown to be beneficial for many long term conditions. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is a treatment that can help people feel better in themselves and adjust to their diagnosis of Atrial Fibrillation. It is an approach that supports a self-management approach to coping with a condition and uses tried and tested methods. CBT has been found to be one of the most effective treatments for conditions where anxiety, frustration and depression are significant problems.

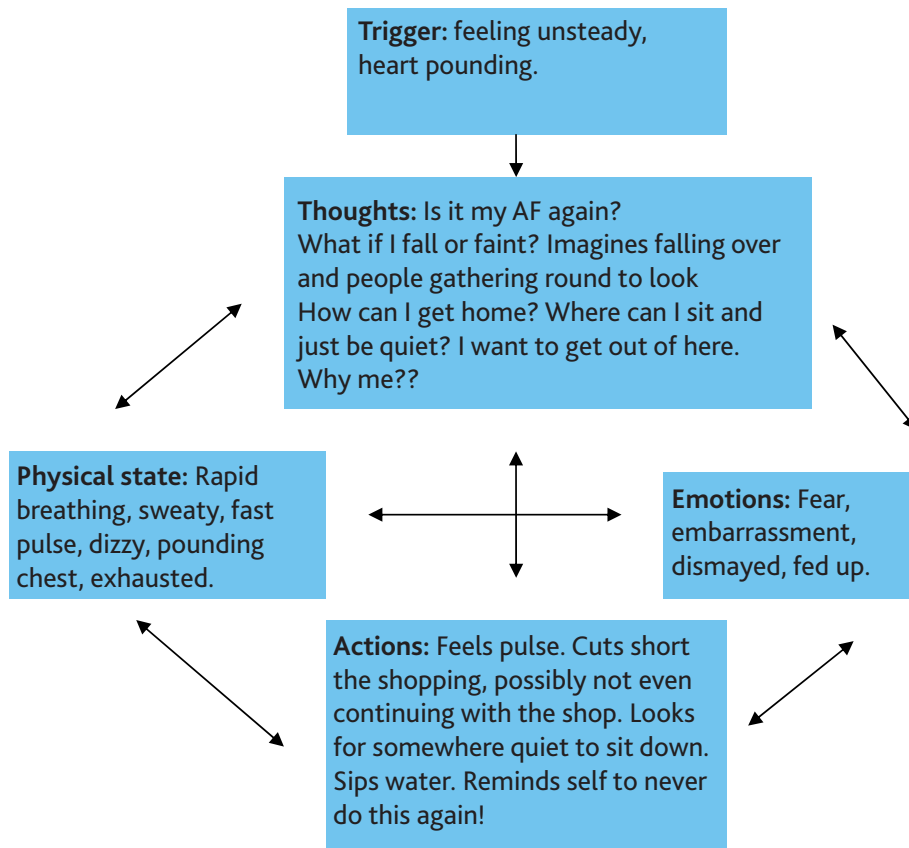
What is CBT?

CBT is a talking treatment directed at the ways you respond to and cope with present difficulties. It is based on understanding the impact of particular situations on what we think, on what we do (or avoid), our physical feelings and our emotions. Thoughts, actions, emotions and physical feelings can all interact. Anxiety due to Atrial Fibrillation might lead you to worry about experiencing an AF episode whilst away from your 'safe' environment, such as while shopping, travelling or at work. This can then lead to rising concern about possible consequences. These worries might understandably lead you to avoid some situations and take various precautions. You may also become oversensitive to normal physical signs which may remind you of AF and lead to you being increasingly anxious. This can set off adrenaline driven symptoms such as a racing heart and faster breathing, which in turn can leave you feeling dizzy or unwell. A vicious cycle develops which can make you feel worse and result in frustration and depression.

How can I get CBT?

Ask your GP or hospital specialist team for a referral to someone trained in CBT. The British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies have a register of accredited CBT therapists. You could also try self help - there are some interactive computer based programmes (for example Beating the Blues and Fear Fighter) available through your GP, and self help books on CBT approaches to coping with physical illness.

Case study example: Eve has been dreading going shopping and worries about how she will cope if an episode of AF develops. At the supermarket it is busy, and she starts to feel her heart pounding. She feels light headed and sick and starts to breathe faster.



Working with an experienced CBT practitioner, Eve can start to identify her difficult experiences and place them into these separate parts. This helps her to understand the 'vicious circle' which is increasing her anxiety. and making her want to avoid situations. This could allow her to recognise the issues and start to identify areas for change. For example, Eve might find it helpful to develop skills to manage many of these symptoms, such as checking she is not over-breathing and learning ways to gently lower her anxiety.

A CBT approach provides an approach to guide you and your practitioner to map out current experiences in detail and look for opportunities which will allow you to try out alternative ways of thinking and acting. The goal is to improve your quality of life by addressing emotional distress and managing physical symptoms better. It is an active therapy – you have to be prepared to try out different approaches and see what the impact is. Sometimes this can make you more anxious before you improve. CBT usually involves working collaboratively with a practitioner, perhaps for six weeks to six months. It is not a 'quick fix' but, for many, it has resulted in significant improvements to their quality of life.

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 Published: April 2010
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