

# CBT and Neurodivergence (Part 2) Applying CBT

By: Jerry Yang and Ella Guan

Editor: Alice Barton

## Introduction

In Part 1, we discussed cognitive distortions, and how they negatively impact our lives. We also delve into their origins and reasons for development. Armed with this understanding, we can turn the tide as long as we display consistent effort, perseverance, and optimism. In Part 2, we will go over various strategies to replace distorted thoughts. We will introduce ways to apply CBT to our own lives but also acknowledge some imperfections of the therapy for neurodiverse individuals.

## Countering Distortions

Here are some very good ways you can conjure effective replacement thoughts to counter cognitive distortions.

**Cost Benefit Analysis:** The squares in the worksheet provided earlier have asked to state both positive and negative thoughts/feelings/actions/consequences. This reflects upon the idea that we may've developed and stuck to these distortions in the hope of some comfort or resolution to our problems. Compare the positives and negatives created by your initial flawed thinking patterns to those of the new replacement thoughts. Hopefully, you'd have figured out new replacement thoughts which yield much better net outcomes than your initial cognitive distortions.

## Cost-Benefit Analysis

The attitude or belief I want to change: *I want all people to like me*

<i>Advantages of Believing This</i>	<i>Disadvantages of Believing This</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It will feel good when people approve of me.</li> <li>2. I'll work hard to make people like me.</li> <li>3. I'll be very sensitive to other people's feelings.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I'll feel lousy when people don't like me or approve of me.</li> <li>2. Other people will control my self-esteem.</li> <li>3. People will not respect me in the long run if I don't stand up from what I believe in.</li> <li>4. I may be less sensitive to other people because I'll be so worried about criticism or conflict.</li> </ol>
35	65
<p><b>Revised Attitude:</b> It can be great to have people like me and approve of what I do. When people are more critical of me, I can understand their point of view.</p>	

<https://image.slideserve.com/212986/cost-benefit-analysis-1.jpg>

**Reality-Check:** Are your perception and thinking backed up by reality? Put effort into reality-checking yourself and search your surroundings for evidence that supports or refutes your thinking. Are people around you actually angry or disappointed around you, or are they neutral or praising you? Are you actually failing or making progress in the long run? Your emotions are likely not the most reliable source of evidence either and could falter to emotional reasoning.



<https://thumbs.dreamstime.com/b/reality-check-28967744.jpg>

**Changing Roles And Perspectives:** Try to view your situation in different ways such as from alternative perspectives. Think of your case and think from the perspective of others, such as your friends, peers, and bosses. If you told them about your thoughts, how would they think of and respond towards them? How would you respond if another person had the same cognitive distortions you have and they sought your help? If you would respond in a mild and positive manner, other reasonable people would likely do the same.



[https://kajabi-storefronts-production.global.ssl.fastly.net/kajabi-storefronts-production/blogs/26395/images/NC43bBfTvaqONozXB7Wg\\_Slide1.jpeg](https://kajabi-storefronts-production.global.ssl.fastly.net/kajabi-storefronts-production/blogs/26395/images/NC43bBfTvaqONozXB7Wg_Slide1.jpeg)

**Exercise Extremes And Generalization:** Try to catch yourself saying or thinking in extremes and overgeneralizations. Is a statement saying something is completely negative in a certain way partially incorrect? It very likely is. Try to come up with counter examples to that statement. For example, if you think you're utterly incompetent, try to see in grey and list situations where you have demonstrated both competency and ineptness. Avoid extreme wording such as "worst", "only", "completely", and "never" in your vocabulary and thinking. Everything has pros and cons.



<https://student-tutor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Words-to-Avoid.jpg>

## Ways to Apply CBT

There are many ways that one can apply CBT therapy, making it a very adaptable method that many people can use effectively. For example, group therapy may not be the best option for neurodiverse individuals who get overwhelmed in an environment with a lot of people; you can do one-on-one CBT between a suitable therapist and a neurodivergent individual. A specialized CBT therapist can guide clients through identifying their unique negative thoughts and replace them in a way best suited for them. For some neurodivergent individuals who enjoy the company of other neurodivergents, group therapy is a good choice and can create an environment for people to work together on the CBT therapy process, especially on focusing on combating common negative ideas, and getting to know other neurodivergent perspectives. Additionally, there are also many self-help resources like books and workbooks that can be done from home. Finally, once you have learned to recognize negativity, you can apply CBT principles beyond therapy sessions to create more positive relationships.

For neurodivergents such as people with autism and/or ADHD, anxiety is often a major hindering factor in their daily lives, as they are considerably more likely to possess overall higher anxiety levels than neurotypicals. They are also more likely to have trouble coping with emotional distress, problem-solving, and social skills, and are substantially more likely to develop anxiety and depression. CBT when adapted and implemented properly can be very effective at teaching them how to counter these problems.

Although CBT might be somewhat difficult for people on the autism spectrum as it requires strong linguistic, emotional processing and identification, and abstract thinking abilities, it is still a method that would yield great boons once fully mastered and is greatly worth pursuing in most scenarios. Many autistic children, however, have shown fluency with distinguishing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and altering their thoughts, yet having only trouble identifying emotions. Autistic people would want to find ways to make CBT more structured and repetitive as well as more visualizable and concrete. Autistic people can also focus on developing social skills, independent living skills, and emotional identification and regulation while reducing anxiety and frustrations caused by those departments when using CBT.

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of ADHD-specialized CBT programs. ADHD people could have developed cognitive distortions due to a lifetime of failures, setbacks, and barriers caused by societal stigma and various ADHD

symptoms such as executive functioning problems. These programs have incorporated CBT as an effective addition to building executive functioning habits and skills such as organization and staying on task, as well as building self-esteem, emotional regulation, and pride. CHADD, Attention Deficit Disorder Association, and the ADDitude Directory are great places to hook up with specialists providing these programs.



<https://i0.wp.com/post.healthline.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/woman-therapist-talking-to-female-patient-1296x728-header.jpg?w=1155&h=1528>

## Drawbacks and Alternatives

CBT is popular because it is research proven and evidently effective; however, there is less evidence of success with neurodiverse clients, with several potential drawbacks. For example, autistic people and some individuals with ADHD have difficulty with flexible thinking; however, the core of CBT is teaching patients to change their way of thinking and their interpretation of events and information. CBT exercises that involve cognitive restructuring are generally very difficult for many neurodiverse people who have trouble with flexible thinking. Additionally, many neurodiverse individuals face difficulties with forming clear and robust verbal communication and understanding. CBT requires a robust link of communication and understanding between the therapist and the client. CBT focuses on changing the way someone thinks. For many neurodiverse people, forcing change in the way they think, especially in ways against their brain's

structural differences, is really challenging. Many neurodiverse individuals are also beginning to embrace various symptoms and differences as simply neurological differences rather than disorders or illnesses to be treated. Thankfully though this could allow CBT to play in the favor of the neurodiverse, as CBT's nature of reducing negativity and increasing acceptance can trigger positive outlooks on neurological differences.

One way to ensure a positive CBT experience is to find a therapist knowledgeable and understanding of the sensory sensitivities, communication styles, and other traits and needs of neurodiverse individuals. Additionally, there are alternative therapies that may synergize better with various neurodiverse conditions. Here is a list of therapies that are good alternatives to CBT:

- **Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT)** is a modular therapy that develops mindfulness, distress tolerance, trauma coping, and emotional regulation, good for ND people with extreme past trauma and mood disorders
- **Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA)** finds functional relationships between environments, behaviors, and consequences for behavioral adjustments and has a specific and structured nature that may excel with autism
- **Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)** helps apply rational thinking to emotion management, especially with dealing with adversity
- **Neurodivergent-Affirming Therapy (NAT)** can help ND people turn their differences into advantages while giving them pride in their differences and identity



**WHAT IS ABA?**

**APPLIED:**  
ABA interventions deal with behaviors that are important and have relevance to a client's life and/or the life of their caregivers.

**BEHAVIOR:**  
Behavior is anything that a person does.

**ANALYSIS:**  
Analysis refers to the ability to evaluate and assess the function of behaviour in relation to the environmental consequences.

www.autism.org.uk



[https://assets-global.website-files.com/61b8e7cc67e74168f1c53f45/626078e7d31d8a45c84f58c4\\_62349b56cb795449b9f0773c\\_Copy%20of%20Group%20Social%20Media%20\(1300%20%C3%97%201080%20px\)-p-800.png](https://assets-global.website-files.com/61b8e7cc67e74168f1c53f45/626078e7d31d8a45c84f58c4_62349b56cb795449b9f0773c_Copy%20of%20Group%20Social%20Media%20(1300%20%C3%97%201080%20px)-p-800.png)  
<https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/5a40d583f6576e1abec2c509/1649244359547-GIGPXNPZCK3LIWXAOPXU/Untitled+%28800+%C3%97+600+px%29+%284%29.png?format=1000w>  
<https://fourweekmba.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/rational-emotive-therapy.png>  
<https://www.autismpartnershipsg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2.png>

## Conclusion

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can be a very powerful tool for neurodiverse individuals struggling with mental health issues due to living in a world full of all sorts of barriers. For many, it helps with combating negative thought patterns. However, there are often many limitations with CBT for neurodiverse people due to its need for emotional management, flexible thinking, and other requirements, many of which are extra strenuous for neurodiverse individuals. That doesn't mean that CBT can't be adapted to work around these challenges, but other alternatives should also be tried. Eliminating the negativity that often arises for neurodiverse individuals is an important step to building a society of inclusivity, equality, and belonging. To all fellow neurodivergent and neurotypicals out, don't let your identity-based disadvantages and life's painful setbacks hold you back from achieving your greatest dreams. You all can shine no matter what you are made of.



<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/65/61/59/656159afaa2ecbd6b85567d6152f8b85.jpg>

## Work Cited

Anderson, Connie. "Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Autism Spectrum Disorders." *Kennedy Krieger Institute*, 16 August 2012,

[https://www.kennedykrieger.org/stories/interactive-autism-network-ian/cognitive\\_behavioral\\_therapy](https://www.kennedykrieger.org/stories/interactive-autism-network-ian/cognitive_behavioral_therapy) Therapy in a Nutshell. "Cognitive Distortions: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Techniques 18/30." *Youtube*, 17 June 2021,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAVGyRMS3gE>

Psych Hub. "What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?" *Youtube*, 16 April 2019,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6aAQgXauQw> Nicholls, Alice. "Why Doesn't Standard Talking Therapy Work for Autistic People?" *Dr. Alice Nicholls*, 30 July 2023,

<https://www.dralicenicholls.com/why-doesnt-standard-talking-therapy-work-for-autistic-people/>

DipCbt, Simon Fraser Mbacp, BSc Psych, Dip. Couns.. "Is CBT Effective When Working With Autistic People?" *Counselling Directory*, 12 Nov. 2022,

[www.counselling-directory.org.uk/memberarticles/is-cbt-effective-when-working-with-people-with-autism](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/memberarticles/is-cbt-effective-when-working-with-people-with-autism). Antonio. "Can a Neurotypical Therapist Treat Neurodivergence?"

*Michigan Counseling and Referral Services*, 6 Jan. 2023,

<https://michiganrcs.com/neurodiversity/can-a-neurotypical-therapist-treat-neurodivergence/>.

Casabianca, Sandra Silva. "15 Cognitive Distortions to Blame for Negative Thinking." *Psych Central*, 11 Jan. 2022,

<https://michiganrcs.com/neurodiversity/can-a-neurotypical-therapist-treat-neurodivergence/>.

Grinspoon, Peter, MD. "How to Recognize and Tame Your Cognitive Distortions." *Harvard Health*, 4 May 2022,

[www.health.harvard.edu/blog/how-to-recognize-and-tame-your-cognitive-distortions-202205042738#:~:text=Cognitive%](http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/how-to-recognize-and-tame-your-cognitive-distortions-202205042738#:~:text=Cognitive%20distortions%20are%20internal%20mental,continually%20processing%20lots%20of%20information.)

[20distortions%20are%20internal%20mental,continually%20processing%20lots%20of%20information.](http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/how-to-recognize-and-tame-your-cognitive-distortions-202205042738#:~:text=Cognitive%20distortions%20are%20internal%20mental,continually%20processing%20lots%20of%20information.)

News-Medical.net. "Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Autism." *News-Medical.net*, 11 Oct. 2022,



[www.news-medical.net/health/Cognitive-Behavioral-Therapy-for-Autism.aspx](http://www.news-medical.net/health/Cognitive-Behavioral-Therapy-for-Autism.aspx).

Dr. Todd Grande. "What Is Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)?" *YouTube*, 21 Feb. 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOi48z4g45Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOi48z4g45Q).

Psych Hub. "What Is Dialectical Behavior Therapy?" *YouTube*, 17 Apr. 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDnvZS5DP68](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDnvZS5DP68). Ascension Sacred Heart. "Autism Center:

Introduction to Applied Behavior Analysis." *YouTube*, 1 Mar. 2017,

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9jFrBv4BKY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9jFrBv4BKY).

Antonio. "7 Things to Know About Neurodivergent Affirming Therapy." *Michigan Counseling and Referral Services*, 6 Jan. 2023,

<https://michigancrs.com/neurodiversity/neurodivergent-affirming-therapy/>. Chadd, S. of. (2018, May 14). *Cognitive-behavioral therapy*. CHADD.

<https://chadd.org/for-adults/cognitive-behavioral-therapy/> Carl Sherman, Ph. D., J. Russell Ramsay, Ph. D., & Barrow, K. (2023, October 23). How CBT dismantles ADHD negativity:

Cognitive behavioral therapy overview. ADDitude.

<https://www.additudemag.com/cognitive-behavioral-therapy-for-adhd/>