

CBT, specifically Trauma-Focused CBT (TF-CBT) and Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), is highly effective for managing trauma triggers, intrusive thoughts, and somatic (body) sensations. It works by addressing the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, breaking the cycle of avoidance and hyperarousal.

Here is how to apply CBT techniques to manage trauma-related intrusive thoughts and body sensations;-

1. **Identify and Manage Triggers**

- Trigger Logging: Keep a log to identify what situations, smells, sounds, or thoughts trigger memories. Record the date, time, trigger, emotional response, and physical reaction.
- Gradual Exposure (In Vivo): Gradually and safely re-expose yourself to avoided situations that act as triggers, breaking the association between the stimulus and the fear response.
- Identify Safety Behaviours: Recognise behaviours used to avoid distress (ie. substance use, isolating, checking) and gradually reduce them.

2. **Manage Intrusive Thoughts**

- Cognitive Restructuring: Challenge and reframe negative thoughts (ie. "It was my fault," "I am unsafe") into more balanced, realistic perspectives (ie. "I did the best I could," "I am safe now").
- Labeling and Distancing: When an intrusive thought occurs, identify it: "I am having an intrusive thought about [event]". Acknowledge it without judgment, similar to a passing cloud, rather than fighting it.
- Scheduled "Worry Time": Set a 10-15 minute daily window to focus on distressing thoughts. If thoughts appear outside this time, postpone them to that designated time.
- Thought Stopping: Use mental cues (saying "Stop") or physical actions (snap a rubber band) to break the cycle of rumination.

3. **Manage Body Sensations and Somatic Memory**

Trauma is often stored in the body, manifesting as tension, pain, headaches, nausea, or shaking.

- Grounding Techniques (5-4-3-2-1): When triggered, look at 5 things, touch 4 things, hear 3 things, smell 2 things, and taste 1 thing to anchor yourself in the present.
- Breathing Retraining: Use slow, deep, diaphragmatic breathing (e.g., 4-7-8 technique: in for 4, hold for 7, out for 8) to calm the nervous system.
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR): Tense and then release muscle groups starting from your toes and working up to your jaw to alleviate physical tension and bracing.
- Mindful Observation: Focus on physical sensations without reacting to them, reducing the "fight or flight" response.

4. **Behavioural and Structural Changes**

- Establish Routine: Create a predictable daily schedule to provide a sense of control and stability.
- Identify "Hot Spots": Identify specific, highly distressing parts of a memory and, with a therapist, update them with current knowledge (e.g., "I survived").

Key Takeaways

- Not a Replacement for Therapy: While these techniques can be practiced at home, they are most effective with a trained therapist.
- Consistency is Key: Regular practice is necessary to desensitize triggers and rewire thought patterns.
- Do Not Suppress: Instead of trying to force thoughts away, observe and challenge them.