



Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Chronic Pain

Fact Sheet for Clinicians

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Chronic Pain (CBT-CP). This effective treatment, with a protocol tailored to the needs of Veterans, is available throughout the VA.

Discussing CBT-CP with your Veterans

- CBT-CP is an established, effective treatment shown to reduce the negative impacts of chronic pain.
- Many Veterans experience benefits of CBT-CP that extend beyond chronic pain, including improved mood, reduced irritability, and better overall quality of life.

What is Chronic Pain?

Chronic Pain is pain persisting for more than three months. It is a complex condition that influences behaviors, thoughts, and mood. People with chronic pain may experience consequences such as:

- Decreased physical, social, and recreational activities
- Feeling down, anxious, or irritable
- Poor performance at work, school, or home
- Loss of self-esteem and self-confidence
- Trouble with attention, concentration, or memory

What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Chronic Pain (CBT-CP)?

CBT-CP is a short-term treatment that is based on reducing the negative impacts of chronic pain on life.

- The “**cognitive**” part of CBT-CP focuses on thoughts, feelings, and expectations about chronic pain and the things that may stand in the way of effective pain management.
- The “**behavioral**” aspect of CBT-CP help develop tools so that Veterans can respond to pain in more adaptive ways.

Why CBT-CP?

When Veterans experience pain due to an acute condition, there are often a number of treatments that can effectively address the underlying cause of their pain and it resolves as expected. Because of the complexity of chronic pain, however, the physical symptoms and related functional issues are often not adequately managed by medical treatment alone. Chronic pain must be approached as a condition, with the Veteran and provider working together to maximize quality of life despite persistent pain.

Without proper pain education, Veterans may have unrealistic expectations about their treatment, contributing to increased frustration and hopelessness as they struggle to cope with their ongoing pain concerns. Understandable but maladaptive responses will often lead to other co-occurring problems such as depression, loss of physical functioning, and deficits in social and recreational activities. These life changes may sustain negative views about oneself and the healthcare system.

The CBT-CP model approaches chronic pain holistically, helping the Veteran appropriately address the social, psychological, and physical impacts of chronic pain. The emphasis is on increasing Veteran’s self-efficacy around the self-management of pain with the adoption of adaptive expectations and coping skills. While relieving pain intensity is always desirable, the focus of CBT-CP is to improve overall functioning and quality of life.



Who does CBT-CP work for?

CBT-CP helps those experiencing negative pain-related consequences in areas such as physical, social, and emotional functioning. Many veterans with chronic pain have psychiatric comorbidities like depression, PTSD, and substance use disorders. As long as participants are psychologically stable, they can benefit from learning skills for managing chronic pain, and these skills may even help with other conditions.

What does CBT-CP involve?

CBT-CP treatment consists of an interview and assessment session and 10 active, skills-based therapy sessions. A follow-up session to review implementation and discuss any areas of difficulty is also encouraged. When possible, weekly sessions are recommended to maximize benefits.



References

- Murphy, J.L., McKellar, J.D., Raffa, S.D., Clark, M.E., Kerns, R.D., & Karlin, B.E. (2014). *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Chronic Pain Among Veterans: Therapist Manual*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Stewart, M.O., Karlin, B.E., Murphy, J.L., Raffa, S.D., Miller, S.A., McKellar, J.D., & Kerns, R.D. (2015). National Dissemination of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Chronic Pain in Veterans: Therapist- and Patient-Level Outcomes. *Clinical Journal of Pain*, 31: 722-729.
- Eccleston, C., Williams, A., & Morley, S. (2009). Psychological therapies for the management of chronic pain (excluding headache) in adults. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 15, CD007407.
- Gatchel, R.J., Peng, M.L., Fuchs, P.N., & Turk, D.C. (2007). The biopsychosocial approach to chronic pain: Scientific advances and future directions. *Psychological Bulletin*, 133, 581-624.
- Hoffman, B.M., Papas, R.K., Chatkoff, D.K., & Kerns, R.D. (2007). Meta-analysis of psychological interventions for chronic low back pain. *Health Psychology*, 26, 1-9.
- Department of Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense. (2010). *VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for Management of Opioid Therapy for Chronic Pain*. Washington, DC: Department of Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense.
- Institute of Medicine. (2011). *Relieving pain in America: A blueprint for transforming prevention, care, education, and research*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Internet Resources:

- <http://www.va.gov/PAINMANAGEMENT/>
- <http://www.veteranshealthlibrary.org/diseasesconditions/ChronicPain/>
- <http://theacpa.org/>

