



FACT SHEET

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY FOR VETERANS WITH CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

The VA is committed to providing Veterans experiencing chronic homelessness with the evidence-based mental health services that they deserve.

Poor mental health is a major public health problem for Veterans who experience chronic homelessness. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Homeless Registry, approximately 68% of homeless Veterans who presented for services in 2013 had a mental health disorder, including substance use disorders. Mental health problems not only contribute to a poor quality of life such as limited social activities, unemployment, poor health status, but also profoundly impact chronic homelessness.

The VA's National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans has developed a national initiative to disseminate and implement an evidence-based psychotherapy for the treatment of depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders specifically for Veterans who experience chronic homelessness.

In collaboration with the Aaron T. Beck Psychopathology Research Center of the University of Pennsylvania, a national staff training program in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been initiated. The overall goal of the CBT Training Program is to provide competency-based training to VA social workers and other mental health professionals who work with Veterans experiencing chronic homelessness in medical center homeless programs. These programs work with Veterans to get them housing and to provide services to sustain their permanency in the community. The CBT

Training Program includes an experientially based workshop training followed by ongoing, weekly consultation with an expert in CBT. The training focuses on both the theory and application of CBT for the treatment of depression, anxiety and substance use disorders. The primary aim of this initiative is to improve the quality of mental health care that is offered to Veterans experiencing chronic homelessness and, ultimately, to improve clinical symptoms and decrease homelessness.

What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a structured, skill-based psychotherapy for depression and related problems. Specifically, CBT:

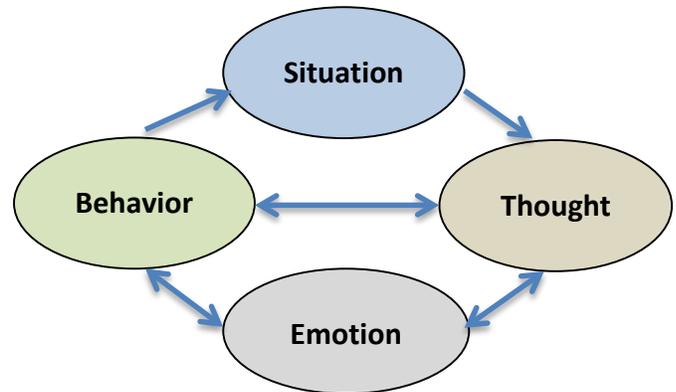
- Incorporates motivational enhancement strategies to promote engagement in therapy
- Emphasizes a collaborative relationship between therapist and Veteran
- Targets extreme or maladaptive thinking and behaviors by implementing specific cognitive and behavioral strategies in an integrated fashion, based on an individualized case conceptualization
- Focuses on reducing depressive symptoms and substance use, achieving mutually established treatment goals, and improving quality of life, including housing retention

Promoting data-driven, evidence-based solutions to end Veteran homelessness

What is the Cognitive Behavioral Model?

CBT is based on the cognitive behavioral model stating that negative mood (such as sadness, anxiety, and irritability) is a function of our thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. For example, individuals with depression usually have three types of negative thoughts or beliefs involving themselves (such as worthlessness), others (such as dangerousness), and/or the future (such as hopelessness).

Understanding these components helps the therapist to develop and use an individualized case conceptualization approach to address the Veteran’s unique problems using specific CBT skills. In essence, the therapist formulates a case conceptualization as a roadmap to be used to guide treatment. It determines how a Veteran’s beliefs and assumptions impact his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors on a day-to-day basis, thus maintaining the clinical symptoms.



Why CBT for Veterans with Chronic Homelessness?

CBT is an ideal treatment option for Veterans experiencing chronic homelessness (Maguire, 2006). Given the short-term, goal-oriented focus of CBT, the treatment targets present day problems that Veterans experience. These could include chronic depression, social isolation, addiction, anger, and anxiety, as well as other difficulties that can interfere with Veterans’ ability to maintain housing.

Treatment typically consists of 16-20, weekly or bi-weekly, individual sessions but the length of treatment is flexible in order to meet the needs of newly housed Veterans. The individualized CBT case conceptualization of a Veteran’s problems is developed during the initial phase of treatment and used to guide the selection of the specific cognitive and behavioral strategies that would be the most beneficial for the Veteran. Therapists regularly evaluate a Veteran’s progress by reviewing patterns in his or her self-reported depressive symptoms and substance use and sharing this information with the Veteran.

CBT is recommended by the VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Major Depressive Disorder

How effective is CBT?

- Decades of research, including a number of randomized controlled trials, have shown support for the short-term as well as the long-term efficacy of CBT for depression (DeRubeis et al., 1999; DeRubeis et al., 2005; DeRubeis et al., 2008; Elkin et al., 1989; Hollon et al., 2006)
- CBT has also been shown to be as effective as antidepressant medications for depression (DeRubeis et al., 2005)
- CBT is associated with significant engagement and reductions in symptoms of depression, as well as improved quality of life for Veterans (Karlín et al., 2012)
- CBT has been shown to be effective for alcohol and illicit drug use (Magill & Ray, 2009)

CBT Teaches Veterans Skills

The CBT therapist encourages increased involvement in goal setting and skills practice as treatment progresses so that the Veteran masters these skills and continues using them to address future difficulties that emerge once treatment has ended. CBT is consistent with the **Recovery Model** that emphasizes self-efficacy, collaboration and skill-building.

CBT is focused on helping Veterans to understand, identify, and respond to thoughts, beliefs or behaviors. CBT sessions are also structured to ensure that:

- The most important issues are discussed during the session
- The therapist understands and empathizes with the Veteran's concerns
- Feedback is obtained regarding the helpfulness of the treatment
- Practice assignments are developed to integrate learned skills into the Veteran's life

The types of skills selected for helping Veterans resolve their mental health problems may be cognitively or behaviorally focused depending on the Veteran's specific circumstances.

Cognitive strategies are used to help teach Veterans to identify negative automatic thoughts that are associated with negative mood states and develop alternative responses to such thoughts that are more accurate or helpful, with the goal of improving mood. In addition, these strategies address motivation to follow through on recovery and housing goals and obstacles that impede progress.

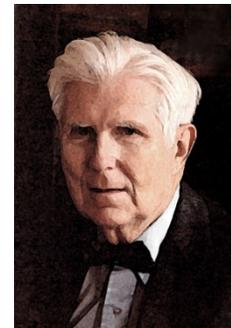
Behavioral strategies are used to help teach Veterans to identify and schedule specific activities that are aimed to increase pleasure and sense of accomplishment. Behavioral strategies are also employed to help Veterans manage urges and cravings to use substances.

What Does the VA CBT Training Program Involve?

The CBT Training Program is under the direction of senior faculty at the University of Pennsylvania including Dr. Gregory K. Brown and Dr. Aaron T. Beck, the founder of CBT.

Features of the CBT Training Program include:

- An intensive 2 ½ day workshop that involves didactic presentations, demonstrations, and participatory role plays to practice CBT skills
- Follow-up training includes weekly, small-group conference calls over a 5-month period with an expert in CBT who provides clinical case consultation on the implementation of CBT with those Veterans who are being served by each therapist
- This intensive training ensures that each therapist feels confident and competent to deliver this evidence-based psychotherapy to Veterans who struggle with chronic homelessness
- Additional features of the program include a comprehensive program evaluation component to assess the effectiveness of the training on therapists' CBT skills as well as on patient outcomes



Aaron T. Beck, MD

More Information

For additional information about the VA CBT Training Program, contact Roger Casey, PhD, LCSW, Director of Education and Dissemination for the VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans. Email Dr. Casey at roger.casey@va.gov or call the Center at **215-823-5800 x 6713**.

The VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans does not provide direct services to Veterans.

For emergency assistance, call the **National Homeless Veteran Hotline 1-877-424-3838**.

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