



Could CBT help me cope with eczema?

The experience of living with eczema can take its toll. Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is an evidence-based therapy that could make a difference. Dr Alpa Kanji tells us more.

Living with eczema can be very challenging. The physical impact of living with the condition can be very difficult to cope with: the constant sensation of itch, subsequent scratching, unpredictable flares, painful broken skin and

disturbed sleep. People living with eczema also report the wider negative effect on their daily activities including personal relationships, work and social lives. The visibility of eczema can also bring feelings of embarrassment, shame, low confidence and loneliness.

The impact of all these challenges on wellbeing can be significant and long term, so psychological support is important. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is one option that can help.

What is CBT?

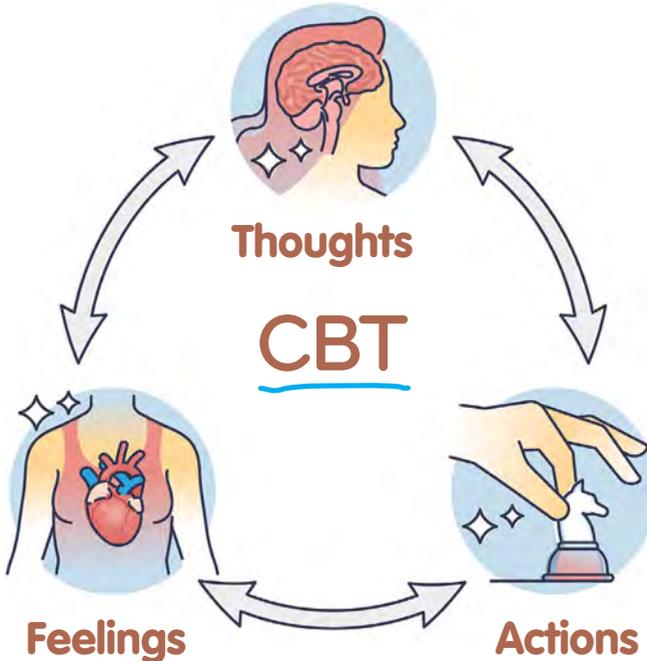
CBT is a talking therapy often used to help people with anxiety and depression. Evidence shows it can also help people living with long-term health conditions, such as eczema, as well as associated problems, such as sleep difficulties, stress, anger and low self-esteem. It can be helpful for adults as well as children and young people.

CBT is based on the idea that thoughts, feelings and actions are all interrelated and that changing one 'link in the chain' can impact the others. An important part of CBT is learning new, more balanced ways of thinking and

doing, to help you cope better with challenging problems. Working alongside a therapist, problems can be broken down into more manageable chunks.

The 'C' stands for 'cognitive' – this involves learning to notice your thought patterns and identify any that are unhelpful or unrealistic, to develop more useful ways of thinking.

The 'B' stands for 'behavioural', which refers to the actions you take. You learn to identify and replace unhelpful actions and behaviours with better ones. For someone with eczema, this may mean learning strategies to reduce scratching in certain situations or building up a consistent skin-care regime.



COULD CBT HELP ME COPE WITH ECZEMA?

CBT might help to address wider behaviours too – for example, some people feel so embarrassed about their visible eczema that they avoid going out. It can also help people accept the reality of living with eczema and dealing with unpredictable flares.

The process involves working with a trained therapist during a series of sessions, over weeks or months. At the outset, you both agree on what you are trying to achieve and the process is tailored to the person's individual circumstances. CBT focuses mainly on improving your mental wellbeing in the present, to help you to feel better and create a more positive future.

To help you practise these skills in daily life, so that you can learn to apply them to everyday situations, the therapist assigns 'homework'. This may involve activities such as journaling, learning to critically evaluate your thoughts and being able to challenge your actions. The therapist works with you to review your homework in the sessions and monitor your progress.

CBT takes time and commitment as well as gradual practice, to replace old ways of doing things with new ones. Where it is successful, it can help people to cope better with living with eczema, resulting in long-term benefits and a more positive outlook on life.

Does it work?

CBT has been shown to help people face a range of challenges by helping them overcome negative thoughts and emotions and unhelpful behaviours. There is also evidence that CBT can help people better manage life with eczema, by reducing anxiety and depression and stigmatising beliefs.



What does the research say?

In 2021, 102 adults with eczema took part in a study in Sweden that involved receiving internet-based CBT for 12 weeks. They were compared to a group of people who received education about their condition but no therapy. By the end of the trial, the people who received CBT had less intense itching, reduced stress levels, better sleep and fewer symptoms of depression at the end.

How do I access CBT?

CBT is available in several different formats, including face to face, by phone and online.

GP referral If eligible, your GP can refer to local CBT services on the NHS.

IAPT (the Improved Access to Psychological Therapies programme) is a programme providing CBT in England. This does not require a GP referral, although you need to be registered with a GP to access the service.

Dermatology referral Larger dermatology centres in the UK may have psychological services available to patients with chronic skin conditions but at present these are limited. If you have a dermatologist, they may be able to refer you for CBT where this service is available.

Children and young people can access CBT through Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), through a GP referral, although there may be long waiting lists.

Private therapists You can also access a therapist privately. This involves paying for the sessions. The British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP) has a register of all the accredited therapists in the UK who have met required standards. Visit its website to find one in your area. (See the box opposite.)

What else might help?

If you can't access CBT easily, or if there is a delay, there are other things that might be helpful:

Self-help CBT resources are available in book form or online (such as the websites Getselfhelp and Living Life to the Full – see the box opposite).

Talk about it to a close friend or trusted family member.

Share your experiences of living with eczema with people who understand – for example, on an online forum or through an organisation such as National Eczema Society or Eczema Outreach Support.

Learn relaxation techniques As stress can often exacerbate eczema, learning strategies to better manage this, including relaxation techniques, can be helpful. There are several online resources that might help with this.

Find out more

- **NHS support on mental health**
www.nhs.uk/mental-health
and NHS finding services
www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-a-psychological-therapies-service
- **Online CBT self-help resources**
Getselfhelp www.getselfhelp.co.uk
and Living Life to the Full
littf.com
- **British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapists**
babcp.com/CBTRegister/Search#
- **National Eczema Society**
www.eczema.org
- **Eczema Outreach Support**
www.eos.org.uk
- **Online guide to managing stress**
www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm



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