

CBT for Agoraphobia

What is CBT?

CBT, or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, is a talking therapy that has been proved to help treat a wide range of emotional and physical health conditions in adults, young people and children. CBT looks at how we think about a situation and how this affects the way we act. In turn, our actions can affect how we think and feel. The therapist and client work together in changing the client's behaviours, or their thinking patterns, or both of these.

What is agoraphobia?

Agoraphobia is a fear of being in situations where escape might be difficult, or help might not be available if things go wrong. People with agoraphobia tend to avoid, or tolerate with considerable fear, many everyday activities as a result. Agoraphobia is often associated with panic disorders. But it may also develop on its own or as part of another disorder, such as depression.

Many people think that agoraphobia is just a fear of open spaces, but it is more complex than that. A person with agoraphobia may be scared of:

- Taking public transport
- Driving on motorways or in heavy traffic
- Travelling over bridges or through tunnels
- Visiting crowded shopping areas
- Using lifts
- Being alone at home
- Leaving home

There is no single cause of agoraphobia. It can often appear in early adult life, sometimes after an unexpected panic attack. The sufferer then begins to avoid situations which they believe will bring on another attack. They can often misinterpret harmless physical symptoms for something more serious, which will make them even more anxious.

CBT works

There is a great deal of research evidence to show that CBT works effectively in treating agoraphobia. This research has been carefully reviewed by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE).

NICE provides independent, evidence-based guidance for the NHS on the most effective ways to treat disease and ill health. CBT is recommended by NICE for the treatment of agoraphobia.

CBT can be used if you are on medication which has been prescribed by your GP. You can also use CBT on its own. This will depend on the difficulty you want help with.

How CBT is used to treat agoraphobia

You and your therapist will discuss your specific difficulties and set goals for you to achieve. CBT is not a quick fix. It involves hard work during and between sessions. Your therapist will not tell you what to do. Instead they will help you decide what difficulties you want to work on in order to help you improve your situation. Your therapist will be able to advise you on how to continue using CBT techniques in your daily life after your treatment ends.

Some of the aims of CBT in treating agoraphobia are:

- Teaching about the nature of agoraphobia and the underlying causes
- Correcting misunderstandings that symptoms such as palpitations or tightening of the chest are dangerous
- Learning techniques to help you cope with unhelpful thoughts about situations linked to agoraphobia
- Finding positive solutions to tackle situations which are feared and being avoided

How CBT is delivered

CBT is available in a wide range of settings, as well as hospitals or clinics. It can be offered in individual sessions with a therapist or as part of a group. It is sometimes provided in the form of written or computer-based packages. This may be combined with flexible telephone or face-to-face appointments to check progress and help overcome any barriers to putting into practice what you have learned. Different ways of delivering CBT have made it more accessible to people with busy lives, and has also reduced delays in getting help.