

Cognitive Analytic Therapy: What It Is and What to Expect

A short guide to give you a sense of how we'll work together, so the shape of therapy feels a little more familiar from the start.

01 What CAT is, in brief

Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT) is a time-limited, collaborative therapy. Rather than me simply listening or you simply talking, we build an understanding together of the patterns that keep difficulties going — where they came from, how they show up now, and what might help you do things differently. "Cognitive" refers to how we think about and make sense of experience; "analytic" refers to looking at where these patterns came from, often reaching back into earlier relationships and experiences.

CAT is usually offered over a set number of sessions, most often 16 - 24, agreed between us as an estimate at the beginning and then reviewed as we go along. Having an end point in mind from the beginning is deliberate: it keeps the work focused, and it means that ending, something that matters in its own right, is planned for rather than left to chance.

02 Regular, weekly sessions

CAT works best at a steady, weekly rhythm. Ideally the pattern of meeting reliably, at the same time each week, is part of what makes the work effective: it gives us a dependable space to return to, and it lets us notice things that unfold gradually, session to session, rather than only in the room on any one day.

03 Semi-structured, and sometimes on paper

Sessions are not an unstructured chat, nor are they a fixed script. We'll talk, as you'd expect, but at points we will also use paper: diagrams, lists, a letter, and questions to reflect on between sessions. Putting things on paper, in your own words, tends to make patterns easier to spot and easier to hold onto outside the room, rather than something that stays only as a conversation.

04 Early sessions: getting to know each other first

If something difficult or painful comes up in the very first session or two, and sometimes it does, I may gently suggest we come back to it once we know each other a little better, rather than go into it in depth straight away. This isn't avoidance; it's about building enough of a working relationship first, that, when we do go into harder material, you have proper support in place for it. A question I'll often ask at the beginning is simply: how do you usually manage when something like that comes up?

05 The reformulation letter

After the first several sessions, once I have a good enough picture of your history and your current difficulties, I will write a reformulation letter: a summary, in plain language, of how I understand what's been happening and why. I'll read this to you, and it's genuinely a draft, an offering of what I heard, a sense making and a place to hold the known, the uncertain and the yet to be explored. You're very welcome to update it. It becomes a shared reference point for the rest of our work together.

06 The Psychotherapy File

Early on, usually in the first or second session, I'll introduce something called the Psychotherapy File. It's a set of descriptions of common patterns of thinking and acting that people can get caught in. There's no scoring system and nothing to get right or wrong. The idea is simply to read through it and notice what feels familiar, cross out or change the wording of anything that's not quite right for you, and make it yours. Then we can explore your thoughts on these common patterns together and keep in mind what feels relevant for you.

It isn't a test. It's a starting point for a conversation between us – a way for you to get a sense of the kind of therapy we're going to do, and to begin sharing with me how some of these patterns show up for you.

Around the same time, I'll also ask you to complete a few standard questionnaires. These give us a baseline, and we repeat some of them later so we can see what's shifted.

07 Identifying your target problems

Together we'll name a small number of target problems: the difficulties that matter most to you, stated as clearly and specifically as we can manage. For each one, we'll also look at what seems to be keeping it going – since understanding what maintains a problem is usually more useful than describing the problem alone.

08 Three common patterns: traps, dilemmas and snags

The Psychotherapy File describes three broad kinds of patterns. You won't necessarily recognise all three in yourself, most people find one or two speak to their experience more than the others. Each tend to be going on and as we talk about challenges they may become more evident.

Traps

A trap is a vicious circle: something we do to manage a difficult feeling which ends up, over time, confirming the very belief that caused the feeling in the first place.

For example: believing you're likely to be let down, you keep people at a distance to protect yourself, which leaves you isolated, which then feels like proof that people do let you down.

Dilemmas

A dilemma is a false choice between two options that both feel unsatisfactory, often experienced as "either I do X, or I do Y", with no middle ground in sight. We often don't notice we're living as if these were the only two options; one side is sometimes more obvious to us than the other. Often these are common dilemmas that we experience as humans with no clear solution that requires more clarity before a helpful exit becomes apparent.

For example: either I keep total control over everything and exhaust myself, or I let go completely and feel like everything falls apart.

Snags

A snag is a quieter pattern, often less conscious, in which doing well or getting what we want comes with a hidden cost – so that progress or success somehow gets undermined, sometimes by us, without quite meaning to.

For example: things finally start going well, and without really deciding to, you find a way to disrupt it – as if succeeding felt somehow unsafe or undeserved.

09 A few things worth knowing

- There's no pressure to have language for any of this in advance. Part of the work is finding the words together.
- Nothing on the Psychotherapy File, or in early sessions, is fixed. Understanding usually sharpens and shifts as we go.
- If anything here raises questions, bring them to a session – that's exactly what the space is for.