

# Cognitive Analytic Therapy

A Psychological Model for Working Directly and Indirectly with Clients with Complex Problems

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Innovation and Outcomes  
in Psychological Therapies

## What is Cognitive Analytic Therapy?

Developed by Dr Anthony Ryle in the late 1980's specifically with the needs of the NHS in mind, CAT is an integrative model of psychological therapy. It draws on cognitive, psychoanalytic, and social learning theories/approaches.

CAT offers an individualised approach within a time-limited framework that is appropriate for a wide range of psychological problems, with particular value for complex emotional and relational difficulties (e.g. personality disorders). CAT aims to help people to understand the origins of their distress, which are often be rooted in early experiences, and how their difficulties may be maintained by the ways that they have learned to cope or to manage their problems, feelings and needs.

CAT can be used as a model for individual therapy, with couples and groups, and also can play a



## What does CAT involve?

CAT is usually offered as a 16 or 24 session therapy. It can be offered as a shorter or longer therapy depending on complexity of the client and their ability to engage in psychological work.

A typical 16 session CAT would involve:

- Sessions 1-4: understanding problems and previous history; a formulation letter written (and read aloud) to the client
- Sessions 5-12: developing a formulation diagram; use of formulation tools and diaries to aid recognition of unhelpful patterns; and developing exits (revision) from these patterns e.g. coping strategies, new ways of relating
- Sessions 13-16: on-going work of therapy plus an explicit focus on ending therapy and loss; goodbye letters read aloud and exchanged
- Follow-up at 3 months for review

## CAT as a Consultation Approach

- CAT can be used in supervision and consultation. Staff, teams, and/or families can benefit from discussing or jointly developing a CAT formulation diagram for clients.
- The aim is to increase understanding and compassion for the client, and awareness of the client's patterns of relating that others can get caught up in (i.e. responding automatically to the client's difficult behaviour or distress, which may inadvertently reinforce unhelpful patterns).
- The formulation diagram takes into account the client's history, current problems and direct experiences of 'being with' the client. The diagram represents relationship patterns and ways of coping that may maintain the client's problems and distress. It can help to explain why some interventions may not be helping or why the client and/or worker may feel stuck.

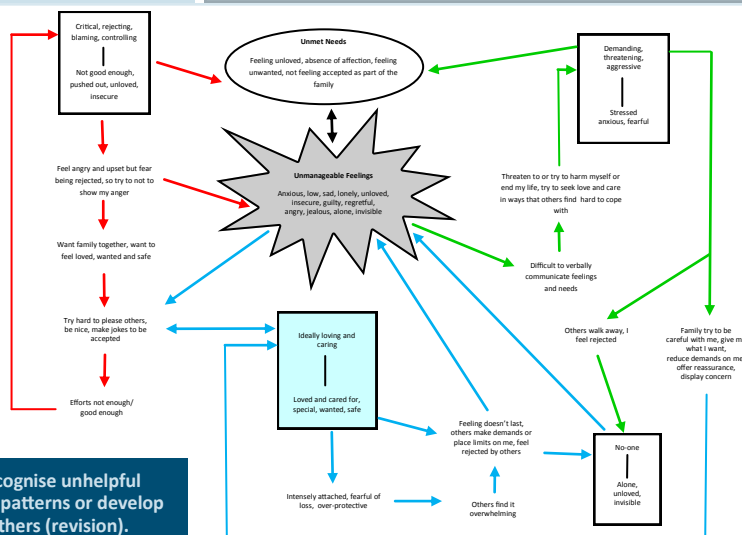
## Key Elements of CAT

- Active and collaborative
- Relational approach—problems seen as a consequence of learned ways of relating, which are repeated in our relationships with others and ourselves
- Working within clients' current psychological capability to increase their ability to self-reflect and make sense of themselves, their feelings and their actions
- Considering the significance of past experience and relationships but also focusing on current problems and relationship patterns
- Central role of individualised formulation letters and diagrams; offering validation for the client, enhancing engagement in therapy, enabling recognition and revision of unhelpful patterns, and helping to anticipate and resolve potential threats to therapy
- Explicitly addresses issues of ending and loss; use of goodbye letters from both therapist and client

## Example of a CAT Formulation Diagram

Understanding the diagram:

- The square boxes represent patterns of relating to self and others (each operating in opposite positions)
- The red loop represents a coping pattern of trying to please to seek care or avoid rejection
- The blue loop represents a coping pattern of seeking idealised care through intense attachment
- The green loop represents a coping pattern of threatening as a way of communicating feelings and needs



The aim of therapy is to learn to recognise unhelpful patterns and to find exits out of these patterns or develop new ways of relating to self and others (revision).

## Service Considerations

- CAT is an effective, time-limited model of therapy that can be used with a wide range of emotional difficulties including complex problems and personality disorders
- It can be used indirectly to support team-working and care planning, and can help to reduce staff stress
- It is not a panacea and requires clients to be willing to think and talk about problems and relationships
- To offer effective CAT therapy or supervision, professionals need to be trained to at least 'Practitioner' level (Post Graduate Diploma in CAT)
- Growing evidence base but currently few Randomised Control Trials

## What Clients Say About CAT...

- 'CAT has changed the way I am trying to live my life'
- 'My wife feels that the 'old me' is coming back'
- 'I will keep it (the letter) forever, as a reminder to myself'
- 'It's like a weight off my shoulders; I knew that you were listening and I felt heard'
- 'I didn't think that I could ever think or feel differently but thanks to the work we have done, I understand now that perfect isn't real...I'm ok with that'
- 'I understand the patterns that I have with people and the way that I deal with things that will help me in the process of changing to make them healthier connections'

## Benefits of Team CAT Formulation

- Increases psychological knowledge and skill in teams and increases clients' access to a psychologically-informed approach
- Offers space for reflection that helps staff to feel supported, valued, and validated
- Staff have a better understanding of the client and greater empathy for the client's difficulties and distress
- Staff understand their role better and feel more contained, confident and motivated in their approach, and less frustrated in the face of difficulties or lack of progress
- Staff are more aware of their own reactions/responses to clients' distress and behaviour, and are less likely to act (or be drawn into responding) in unintentionally unhelpful ways