

# Craving a Change in your Practice? Give CBT Techniques a Try

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Why does our mouth water when we envision biting into a lemon? Why do we eat the food left on our child's plate when we can easily dispose of it in the kitchen trash? Why do we buy the footlong sandwich when we'd be satisfied with the 6-inch? The answer is simple – our mind is influencing our body and behavior, and our mind is powerful! In fact, your clients will have more success changing their eating habits if they learn to change their thinking habits.

The cognitive-behavioral theory (CBT) model is ideal for addressing this psychology of eating. The interplay of our thoughts, feelings and behaviors has been extensively researched for decades. The use of CBT techniques is recommended in many countries' clinical practice guidelines for chronic medical conditions. The research demonstrates that **when clients are more aware of how their thoughts and feelings influence their behavior, they often make different choices.** The mother who recognizes that her mind is replaying the message that "Food shouldn't be wasted" can challenge this learned thought with others such as "But, my body doesn't need this extra food right now" or "I can store it for later." Awareness of thoughts like "I'll get more bang for my buck with the bigger sandwich" may be countered with a response like "But, I'll actually spend more and the extra bread could increase my blood sugars."

Your client's mindset is a gold mine of valuable information. Encourage a client to listen to her or his inner food conversations with curiosity. Clients are often surprised and fascinated by what they discover. Together, you may identify cognitive distortions. For example, clients often present with the problematic "all-or-nothing" thinking pattern. They think "Darn, I slipped up with my eating. That's it, I'll need to start over again tomorrow."

Thankfully, the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans suggest an 85/15 approach to food choices where 85% of calories come from nutrient-dense foods while 15% come from sugar, alcohol and saturated fat. As a dietitian, you can help clients challenge their self-imposed 100/0 mindset and embrace the Guidelines' more flexible way of thinking about less nutrient-dense foods.

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Lead your client through a visualization of a time when she or he felt she/he gave into a food craving. For example, when a client ate a large bowl of ice cream after getting home after work. Ask your client to imagine reaching into the freezer for the ice cream. Invite the person to tune into the thoughts that preceded this action. These might include "I'm soooo stressed! Doesn't my manager know that I'm doing my best? We're short-staffed, procedures keep changing, and I had to stay late, again!" Now your client can acknowledge, understand and appreciate that he/she wasn't just thinking "I want ice cream!"

This provides an opportunity to explore how your client could respond to these thoughts differently. The person's inner conversation might be, "Okay, I'm not hungry; I'm stressed. Ice cream does soothe me, but it doesn't deal with the problem causing me this stress. And, I know that I'll feel guilty if I eat the ice cream. Maybe I'll go for a walk to calm down instead." **This awareness, self-talk and cognitive restructuring are empowering!**

Introducing the CBT approach and strategies in a *group setting* is especially effective. Pivoting from individual counseling to in-person or virtual workshops enables more clients to access dietitian services while dietitians can interact with more clients. More important, clients learn that they "are not alone" in their struggles. They are intrigued to learn from their peers' experiences, reflections and results when changing their mindsets.

Helping your clients learn to tune into and adjust their thoughts is a refreshing and transformative method of promoting eating behavior change. Consider giving CBT a try in your own practice.



Wendy Shah, RD is co-founder of Craving Change®, a licensed, psycho-

educational training and certification program for clinicians working with clients who struggle to make and maintain positive changes to their eating. Wendy consistently inspires her colleagues with novel and creative practices and received the Dietitians of Canada Member Recognition Award for Innovation. Wendy lives in beautiful British Columbia. She loves to satisfy her family and friends' stomach, mouth and heart hunger with her awesome baking. She is totally impressed with NE's emphasis on support and mentoring and would love to connect with more like-minded NE colleagues.