



CBITS

(Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools)

Teacher Education Information

The Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) program is a school-based, group and individual intervention. It is designed to reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and behavioral problems, and to improve functioning, grades and attendance, peer and parent support, and coping skills.

CBITS has been used with students from 5th grade through 12th grade who have witnessed or experienced traumatic life events such as community and school violence, accidents and injuries, physical abuse and domestic violence, and natural and man-made disasters.

CBITS uses cognitive-behavioral techniques (e.g., psychoeducation, relaxation, social problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and exposure).

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Education about Common Reactions to Trauma:

This part of the session conveys information about general types of problems that children experience when they have been exposed to traumatic life events.

- o All of the problems are common reactions to severe stress.
- o The group for the children is designed to help with these specific problems.
- o Children often have comorbid problems, like depression, disruptive behavior problems, or ADHD. Not to suggest that trauma is the root cause of all the problems that the children have, rather, trauma-related symptoms are part of the picture.
- o Other problems, like ADHD and depression, can sometimes mask trauma-related symptoms. The reverse is also true—trauma-related symptoms can mask other severe problems. Diagnosis and treatment are complex because it is necessary to tease apart the problems in order to implement appropriate treatments.

Common Reactions to Stress or Trauma:

People cope with trauma in different ways. You may find a student exhibiting one or more of the following symptoms:

Having nightmares or trouble sleeping. When something really scary or upsetting happens, it takes a while to figure out exactly what happened and what it means. After severe stress or trauma, people tend to keep thinking about what happened in order to “digest” it, just like your stomach has to work to digest a big meal. This can take a long time. ***Classroom manifestation: fatigue, sleepiness during the day.***

Thinking about it all the time/re-enacting it. This is another way to digest what happened. Just like having nightmares, thinking about the trauma all the time is a problem because it makes you feel upset. It can be unpleasant. ***Classroom manifestation: trouble concentrating, tearfulness, repetitive play around theme of trauma.***

Wanting to NOT think or talk about it. This is natural, since it is upsetting to think about a past stress or trauma and can make you feel all sorts of emotions. Avoiding trauma memory makes things easier, but only for a little while. It’s important to digest what happened sooner or later. So, while avoiding it sometimes makes sense, you have to set aside some time to digest it also. ***Classroom manifestation: trouble sitting still, constantly creating distractions, not wanting to talk about problems.***

Avoiding places, people, or things that make you think about it. Just like not wanting to talk about or think about the trauma, avoiding situations that remind you of what happened can help you feel better right then. The problem with this, though, is that it keeps you from doing normal things that are an important part of your life. ***Classroom manifestation: resistance to doing certain things or going certain places, without a clear explanation of why; absenteeism because of avoidance of things on the way to school or of school itself.***

Feeling scared for no reason. Sometimes this happens because you remember what happened to you, or you are thinking about what happened. Other times it happens because your body is so tense all the time that you just start feeling scared. ***Classroom manifestation: getting upset easily.***



Feeling “crazy” or out of control. If all of these things are problems for you, you can start to feel really out of control or even crazy. Don’t worry, though; these problems don’t mean that you are going crazy. They are all normal reactions to stress or trauma. ***Classroom manifestation: getting upset easily.***

Not being able to remember parts of what happened. This happens to a lot of people. The stressful event can be so awful that your memory doesn’t work the way it usually does. Sometimes it gets easier to remember later on, and sometimes it gets harder. This can be frustrating, but it is really normal. ***No clear classroom manifestation.***

Having trouble concentrating at school or at home. With all the nervousness you are feeling and all the time you are spending thinking about what happened, it can be hard to concentrate on school work or even on what your friends or family say to you. ***Classroom manifestation: concentration problems, not finishing activities, doing worse on school work and tests.***

Being on guard to protect yourself; feeling like something bad is about to happen. After something bad happens to you, it makes sense to be prepared for another bad thing to happen. The problem with this is that you can spend so much time waiting for the next bad thing to happen that you don’t have time or energy for other things in your life. Also, it is scary to think something bad is going to happen. ***Classroom manifestation: wanting to face the door or have back to wall, keeping alert at all times.***

Jumping when there is a loud noise. This is one way that your body says it is prepared for action, in case something else happens. ***Classroom manifestation: being startled easily.***

Feeling anger. Some people feel angry about the stress or trauma that happened, or about the things that happened afterward. Other people just feel angry all the time, at everything and everybody. ***Classroom manifestation: increased fights with peers, being oppositional.***

Feeling shame. Sometimes people are ashamed about what happened to them or how they acted. Even though it’s hard to believe, this gets better the more that you talk about what happened. If you keep it a secret, it’s hard for the shame to go away. ***Classroom manifestation: withdrawal from peers, poor eye-contact, negative self-statements.***

Feeling guilt. People can feel guilty about what happened or about something they did or did not do. Sometimes you blame yourself for things that you couldn’t control. You may also feel guilty for upsetting your parents. Guilty feelings can make it hard to talk about what happened. ***Classroom manifestation: negative self-statements.***

Feeling sadness/grief/loss. Sometimes stress events or traumas include losing someone close to you or losing something that is important to you. This makes you feel sad and down. ***Classroom manifestation: tearfulness, clinging to parents or teachers, withdrawal from peers.***

Feeling bad about yourself. Sometimes all this can make you feel really bad about yourself, like you’re a bad person or that no one likes you. This makes it harder to be friendly and to have fun with others. ***Classroom manifestation: withdrawal from peers, negative self-statements.***

Having physical health problems and complaints. Stress has an effect on your body as well. People sometimes get sick more often or notice pain and discomfort more often when they have been under stress. ***Classroom manifestation: more trips to the school nurse, absenteeism, complaints about stomachaches or headaches.***



Explanation of CBITS:

This part of the session provides an overview of how thoughts and behaviors influence the feelings.

Figure 3



-When something stressful happens, how does that change what you think? What you do? What you feel?

-Stress or trauma causes all of these to change and each then impacts the others, making you feel worse.

-A possible example:

“Marisol is in a car accident. That’s the stress or trauma. Afterwards, she feels shaky, nervous, upset. She thinks that riding in a car is really dangerous, and she doesn’t want to go in the car again. When her mother asks if she wants to go shopping with her, she says no and stays home, because she doesn’t want to be in the car.”

The program is going to help with things like this:

In this program, we are going to work on all three corners of the triangle. We are going to:

- Teach the children some exercises that will make them FEEL better and less nervous or upset.
- Teach them some ways to THINK about things that will also make them feel better.
- Teach the children some ways to DO things so that they are able to do everything they want to do without feeling upset when they do them.

Elements of the CBITS Program:

- ☑ Relaxation exercises to combat anxiety.
- ☑ Education about common symptoms to normalize them.
- ☑ Work on negative, maladaptive thoughts to teach children to generate more positive, accurate, and flexible ways of interpreting problems. This is intended to combat negative ideas that the world is very dangerous or that the self is bad.
- ☑ Social problem-solving to help children cope with problems with friends and family members. This includes thinking about the problem, brainstorming possible solutions, and evaluating pros and cons of potential solutions.
- ☑ Real life exposure to trauma-related events and situations. This is used to combat trauma-related anxiety by gradual and repetitive exposure to trauma reminders and triggers of anxiety while being safe. Situations include things that were actually present during the trauma as well as things like being alone, sleeping alone, feeling vulnerable.
- ☑ Exposure to trauma memory in imagination or through drawing or telling others in the group. This is used to process the trauma and reduce anxiety related to thinking about or remembering the trauma.



Tips for Teaching Children Who Have Been Traumatized:

☒ See children’s behavior through a “trauma lens.” This means taking into account the children’s traumatic life events and trying to understand why they might be acting out. Try to remember that even the most disruptive behaviors can be driven by the fear and anxiety created during trauma exposure.

☒ Give children choices and consistency. Often traumatic events involve loss of control and/or chaos, so you can help children feel safe by providing them with some control and a sense of consistency.

☒ Understand that attempts by children to replay trauma through play or through their interactions with others is a way to cope with trauma. Resist their efforts to draw you into a repetition of the trauma. For instance, some children will provoke teachers in order to replay abusive situations at home.

☒ Understand that children who have experienced trauma have idiosyncratic triggers that make them highly anxious. Triggers may include many kinds of situations. If you are able to identify what they are, you can help the children by preparing them for the situation and making sure that they feel comfortable. For instance, children who don’t like being alone may not want to go to the bathroom alone at school. Consider sending children to the bathrooms in pairs if this is a problem for a child in your classroom. It can also be helpful to warn children if you will be doing something out of the ordinary, such as turning off the lights or making a sudden loud noise.

☒ Seek support and consultation to prevent burn-out. Be aware that you can develop symptoms through “vicarious traumatization” or exposure to traumas through the children you work with.

Information taken from CBITS website cbitsprogram.org, please visit website for more information.

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