Aaron T. Beck and Cognitive Therapy

AARON T. BECK · 1921–2021

How one psychiatrist's attention to his patients' thoughts changed psychotherapy

Aaron T. Beck was an American psychiatrist at the University of Pennsylvania, widely regarded as the originator of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Trained in psychoanalysis, he began in the early 1960s to question it after noticing that people with depression experienced quick, negative thoughts about themselves. He called his new approach cognitive therapy.

1921 — Born in Providence, Rhode Island

1961 — Publishes the Beck Depression Inventory

1963 — First papers on thinking and depression

1977 — First trial of cognitive therapy versus antidepressants

1979 — *Cognitive Therapy of Depression* manual

1994 — Co-founds the Beck Institute with Judith Beck

2021 — Dies aged 100

01 The cognitive model

how thoughts sit between events and feelings

Core beliefs — deep, general beliefs about self, others and the world
"I'm unlovable."

Intermediate beliefs — rules, attitudes and assumptions
"If people really knew me, they'd leave."

Automatic thoughts — quick thoughts that pop up in a situation
"She's bored of me."

Reactions — emotions, body sensations and behaviour
sad, heavy, goes quiet

Automatic thoughts

Brief thoughts or images that arise in a situation, often without being noticed, and that shape how we feel and act.

Thinking errors

Beck described systematic distortions in depressed thinking, such as overgeneralising and drawing conclusions without evidence (Beck, 1963).

Beliefs underneath

Automatic thoughts grow from deeper rules and core beliefs, often formed early in life (Beck, 2021).

02 The cognitive triad

Beck's account of depressive thinking

The self
"I'm inadequate."

The world
"Nothing goes right for me."

The future
"It will always be this way."

03 How the therapy works

structured, collaborative, time-limited

Collaborative empiricism

Therapist and client work as a team, treating thoughts as ideas to test.

Guided discovery

Socratic questions help people find their own answers.

Thought records

Catching, writing down and weighing automatic thoughts.

Behavioural experiments

Testing predictions in real life, between sessions.

04 Legacy and evidence

FROM DEPRESSION TO MUCH MORE

Beck developed the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1961) and, with colleagues, a treatment manual for depression (Beck et al., 1979). In 1977 his team published the first controlled trial comparing cognitive therapy with antidepressant medication. CBT was later adapted for anxiety, personality difficulties, psychosis and more.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

CBT has one of the strongest evidence bases of any psychological therapy, across many conditions, though it does not suit everyone and outcomes vary (Hofmann et al., 2012). Beck remained active in developing new approaches until shortly before his death in 2021, aged 100.

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