



Talking About Mental Health: A Guide for Primary Care Providers

Start the conversation and connect patients to free CBT services for depression and anxiety.

As a healthcare provider, you play a key role in supporting patients with their mental health care. This guide offers practical tips for starting the conversation, addressing common concerns, and connecting patients to free Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) through the Ontario Structured Psychotherapy (OSP) program.

Ontario Structured Psychotherapy (OSP)

offers free, evidence-based, CBT services to adults (18+) who experience depression and anxiety-related concerns.

Self-referrals and referrals from healthcare providers are accepted. To get started visit osp-cmha.ca

1. Validate the presenting problem

Depression is a health issue, not a weakness. Just like back pain, stress takes a toll on your body. **Everyone has mental health.** Mental health, like physical health, fluctuates and requires care.

Framing the conversation:

What you're describing makes a lot of sense – you're feeling exhausted and run down. Would you be open to learning about some healthcare options for what you're experiencing? Just like a shoulder injury or the flu, our emotional health needs care too and can use a boost and check up every now and then.

2. Explain CBT simply

CBT addresses how we think and behave by:

- Helping patients face fears and reduce avoidance.
- Exploring the ways our internal voice directs our emotions and behaviours, and in turn, how our behaviours influence our “self-talk”.
- Examining typical responses to see if they are beneficial or need adjustment.
- Providing brief, practical coping strategies.

Framing the conversation:

Think of CBT as a mental ‘tune-up’ like maintaining your car. When your engine’s overworked, you don’t just keep pushing it until it breaks down—you take it in for service. Your brain works the same way. CBT helps you recognize what’s weighing you down, how to adjust and get back to running smoothly.

Taking care of your mood is like going to the gym. You start with a coach to learn techniques, then gradually build the skills to work out on your own. CBT works the same way. With the help of a coach or clinician, you learn strategies to manage your emotions independently over time.

3. Address barriers and misconceptions

OSP offers flexible options, like online access, phone-based help, and in-person/virtual meetings. The best part? You don't have to go anywhere. Some formats don't even require speaking with a therapist directly.

Framing the conversation:

Talking about my problems won't help: CBT is different than how therapy is depicted on TV or in the movies. It's not about open-ended talking. Sessions are very focused and active. You set goals and work towards those goals. And learn new ways to manage stress and emotions. Many people notice changes within a few weeks.

I don't want to dig up the past: CBT focuses on the present – helping to manage what's happening now. You don't have to talk about the past. You'll gain insights into how your past may be coming up now and learn practical coping strategies.

4. Choose treatment: CBT, medication or both

For disorders like depression and anxiety, patients may benefit from CBT, medication, or a combination of both, as they are all recommended as first-line treatment options.

Framing the conversation:

Patient prefers medication: Medication and CBT can both be effective. Research shows that for conditions like anxiety and depression, CBT is just as effective as medication because it teaches you strategies you can use for life.

Patient is on medication (depending on disorder): We see that even with medication, things are still tough for you. Adding CBT could provide lifelong coping skills. Research indicates that combining CBT with medication leads to better, longer-lasting results.

Patient declines medication (depending on disorder): I hear you; medication is just one option but not the only one. Have you heard of CBT? It's a practical, short-term approach to improving mood and stress levels.

5. Address stigma or hesitation

Emphasize the importance of caring for your mental health. Just like we set goals and work on problems in other parts of our lives, we also need to work on mental wellness.

Framing the conversation:

I don't think therapy is for me: CBT isn't about lying on a couch and talking about your childhood. It's more like a mental workout -- it teaches you new ways to handle stress and emotions.

What if symptoms return after CBT ends? Taking care of your mental health is an ongoing process. You can return for care if you need more skills or a refresh.

6. Use examples, share evidence and success stories

Sharing real-life success stories that resonate with the patient can build confidence and reinforce the effectiveness of treatment.

Framing the conversation:

One patient told me that after a few sessions, he started sleeping better, felt less road rage and had more control over his day. Research shows that CBT is one of the best treatments for stress, anxiety, and depression – even more effective than medication for some people.

7. Try a session or two

Patients may be more open to CBT if they see it as something they can “test out”. Ask them what they have to lose by giving it a try.

Framing the conversation:

What about trying one or two sessions to see how it goes and if it’s not for you, that’s OK. What would be the benefits or the drawbacks if you didn’t give it a try?

8. Respond to concerns about the short-term nature of CBT

Mental health is an ongoing process. CBT provides tools patients can use long after the sessions end.

Framing the conversation:

Learning CBT is like learning a new language. It takes practice for skills to become second nature. At first, you might take lessons to learn new words and phrases. Eventually, the more you use the language, the more naturally it comes to you. Therapy works the same way. You learn skills in sessions and practice them in your daily life. The more you practice, the more naturally it will come to you. This is one of the reasons why people don’t need to be in CBT for life. CBT has been researched for decades showing that even short-term treatment leads to lasting improvements. CBT is designed to give you results in a shorter timeframe by focusing on practical strategies and practice between sessions.

Note: This resource is designed to support primary care providers in having patient conversations about mental health in the context of the OSP program. Consider patient needs and preferences, in addition to using clinical judgement.