



Life and Living: A candid and quirky approach

with *Ev Francis*

Hello, my loves, how are you all doing? Are you ready for another instalment of something quirky and a little sassy? In this issue, I want to give you my thoughts on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) - you know, that therapy the medical professionals advise people like you and I to go through.

Disclaimer alert: I've got no medical experience or knowledge so these are my views on CBT rather than expert thoughts.

It is a year since a very cold, quite unfriendly and dry doctor informed me of my diagnosis. My doctor at the time had about as much personality as your garden chair set and the poor



'bedside manner', displayed whilst telling me I had ME/CFS doesn't remotely describe the reality. It wasn't the diagnosis that broke me, but the part where she uttered the following sentence: "I'd recommend visiting a psychotherapist to discuss your condition". It was a sentence that made me feel a fraud, or even blinking mad. I'd spent months with exhaustion, nerve damage and poor cognitive skills - yet her medication, treatment and advice was to seek the same treatment you'd advise a person with anxiety or depression. I was disheartened to say the least.

CBT is based on the concept that your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and actions are interconnected, and that negative thoughts and feelings can trap you in a vicious cycle. CBT aims to help you deal with problems in a more positive way by breaking them down into smaller parts and learning how to change these negative patterns to improve the way you feel. CBT deals with your current problems, rather than focusing on issues from your past. It looks for practical ways to improve your state of mind on a daily basis. It's so strange to consider that, even to this day, the way we are treating such a life-changing illness is through psychological methods in favour of trying to tackle the issue.

After three months of thinking I had accepted my diagnosis, I relapsed. Returning to full-time employment and to the hustle and bustle of London was too much. The second I stepped into full-time work my emotions were everywhere, I wasn't sleeping, plus physically and, most importantly, mentally, I was a mess. I simply couldn't handle the stress.



I knew things were bad after collapsing on the train home. I returned to my GP in tears and the doctor asking me "are you okay?" was like being told my best friend had died. Trapped in a vicious circle of low mood, anxiety and fragility, I knew I needed help. Talking to friends and family was not cutting it. So, I accepted CBT.

Before telling you whether I think CBT is worth its profile on the NHS website, I'll tell you my story.

I'd been on the waiting list for six months before receiving a referral. So, was it worth the six-month wait?

Due to waiting lists and more urgent cases, I was given a block of four session which included the introductions and legal hours session. In actual fact, the sessions are only for 30 minutes if you read the small print. Each week, I brought new thoughts and new feelings to the table. I focused primarily on what was eating away at me, rather than could help me deal with.

I've heard negative stories regarding CBT, and maybe

it should not be used as the primary treatment for those diagnosed with ME. When I'm anxious or stressed or just depressed, it eats away at my already low energy and causes a relapse. I can't say if there are triggers occurring in my mind, but I know that, to manage my ME as best as I can, I need to eliminate the issues that will make it worse. So, could there be a reason why the medical profession suggests their patients have a course of CBT, since every illness gets worse with triggers? Those with arthritis, for example, will perhaps find that the changing seasons impact their health issue, just like stress, low mood and anxiety impacts on mine. That said, does CBT eliminate ME? Nah, not a chance! You'll still wake up in the mornings feeling like you've had ten minutes sleep rather than nine hours.

During my weekly therapy sessions, I realised how much of the past I had held onto. My anxieties and negative thoughts had encouraged me to remain anxious rather than focusing on the present. The 'what if's' and the 'should have's' had eaten away at me and caused a circle of worry and low mood. I realised that when I had a negative thought I needed to ask why it was there.

Personally, I have found talking to someone who doesn't know that I upload an Instagram/Facebook picture each time I go out for dinner, or that I write a blog, or that I fancy Richard Hammond, to be super helpful. Without the emotional connection there is with friends or family, she can focus on my worries, which are mainly based around the last two years. With her help I've been able to let go of my fears, anxiety and self-loathing.

So ME & CBT, what do I think?

I'm not a believer in this being a treatment for those with ME, since it hasn't eliminated the nerve pain, the daily exhaustion and the constant desperation for a nap. But it does help to manage negative thoughts and feelings that perhaps play a part in the relapses and could therefore make the relapses worse and longer.

So CBT is 'helpful' but not close to be a 'treatment' a 'cure'. We still need to find a practical means of treating our condition that does not involve someone analysing our thought patterns.

I believe that everyone with ME/CFS should be given a course of CBT in the early stages of their journey, perhaps at the initial diagnosis. Had I received CBT at the beginning of my diagnosis perhaps I would never

have had the relapse earlier in the year, perhaps would not have needed time out of work, perhaps would not have required anti-depressants.

Doctors still don't understand the condition. They don't understand that the illness is not one that disappears overnight or one that can be treated with drugs. But they can offer the option of CBT at the beginning, as a way of helping the newly-diagnosed to get their head around the illness and its attack on their life.

It's been two months since I had my final CBT session and I can now confirm that having the session was one of the best decisions I have made. I feel mentally better and in a position that I can manage my mental state as well as the actual illness. I am not, by any means, 'fixed' but I do feel more in control. So when my ME flares up it doesn't trigger depression any more.

Of course, there are those who undergo CBT for ME and don't have the success that I've had, so it is still important not to generalise. CBT is not for everyone, but it **can** help in the daily managing of the illness. ■

If you want to continue the conversation and follow the daily life of Ev, you can follow her on:

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Ev's debut novel, ***I'm not Ready***, is now available in paperback or on Kindle at www.amazon.co.uk

