



April 30, 2019

To: Margaret O'Malley / Margaret.Omalley@nbcuni.com
NBC News, BETTER Editor

Dear Ms. O'Malley:

We at the Psychotherapy Action Network ([PsiAN](http://PsiAN.org)) are writing out of concern that your article of 29 April 2019, "What is cognitive behavioral therapy and how does it work?" will mis-lead your readers, likely preventing many from getting the help they need. Your article uncritically presents CBT as the "gold standard" treatment for an enormous range of emotional symptoms. Unfortunately, this assertion is incorrect. No less than JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association, published an article asking "Is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy the Gold Standard for Psychotherapy?," and the answer was clearly "No."

There is much evidence supporting the conclusions that JAMA and other prominent researchers have come to regarding the shortcomings of CBT and the powerful, lasting treatment effects of other psychotherapies. As researcher Jonathan Shedler, PhD notes in a widely-praised meta-analysis of the effectiveness of CBT, "evidence-based" therapies [such as CBT] are weak treatments. Their benefits are trivial, few patients get well, and even the trivial benefits do not last." In contrast to CBT and other short-term, symptom-focused treatments where treatment gains tend to disappear a few months after treatment stops, psychotherapies of depth are most likely to continue to help people, even years after they stop therapy.

Further, while touting a treatment as "evidence-based" makes it sound like it is proven to be effective, this term has been reduced to more of an ideological buzzword than a mark of an intervention's usefulness. A treatment can be called "evidence-based" if it has been studied by a research lab; however, these controlled laboratory-type conditions rarely have bearing upon the real-world, complex problems that are encountered by clinicians in their offices. As Enrico Gnoulati, PhD and many others have suggested, restricting available treatments and the training needed to implement them to methods that are "evidence based" has resulted in an erosion of the quality of psychotherapy practice in our society in general, making it harder for people to get lasting help.

Indeed, as was recently highlighted in a ruling against United Behavioral Health Care in the class-action ruling *Wit v UBH*, District Magistrate Judge Spero's decision against UBH served to reveal the ways in which insurance companies put profits over people. He found that UBH denied funding more effective treatments that address underlying problems, and instead favored short-term treatments like CBT that focus on superficial symptom-reduction. In fact, the complete evidence base shows that treatments of depth, insight and relationship offer symptom relief as quickly as CBT and other so-called "evidence-based" treatments; they take longer simply because they are doing more, which shows not only in the robustness of their results, but in their cost-effectiveness over the long term.

The Psychotherapy Action Network, a global community of mental health professionals and stakeholders dedicated to promoting substantive and lasting psychotherapies, aims to correct the sorts of gross misconceptions that your article promotes. While PsiAN does not dispute the usefulness of CBT techniques for some patients, especially when these techniques are implemented by practitioners immersed in understanding the lived experience of those with whom they work, we believe that your uncritical presentation of CBT as the go-to for myriad human problems will cause more harm than good.

We urge you to retract the article on your website lest your readers interpret what will likely be disappointing treatment results as their own failures. The organization you reference, the ABCT, is purportedly a professional organization representing CBT practitioners, yet its main strategic goal is to obtain "greater media coverage of CBT-related topics," and promote CBT as a brand. They don't need to recruit you for their marketing team, nor do you need to settle for infomercial-type essays when your usual high journalistic standard suggests that you can do better.

Sincerely,

Nancy Burke, PhD

Linda Michaels, PsyD MBA

Janice Muhr, PhD

Co-Chairs, Psychotherapy Action Network

References:

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