

CBT for individuals with a Learning Disability (including Williams Syndrome)

(written by Professor Debbie Riby)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can be adapted and is beneficial for people with learning disabilities, helping them manage mental health challenges like anxiety and depression.

While CBT principles remain the same, modifications are often necessary to accommodate cognitive and support needs.

Key Adaptations and Considerations:

- Face to face appointments.
- Simplified Language and Visual Aids: Using clear, concise language and visual supports like pictures, symbols, or Makaton (signs and speech) can improve understanding and engagement for individuals with WS.
- Slower Pace and Repetition: Therapy sessions may need to be paced more slowly, with concepts repeated and reinforced to ensure comprehension, not just surface-level acceptance.
- Emotional literacy: individuals with WS can be extremely emotional and understanding one's own emotions and those of others should be a core element on all CBT for this group.
- Focus on Practical Skills: CBT can teach practical coping strategies and skills that can be applied to everyday situations - these may be especially important based on the cognitive ability of the person with WS.
- Collaborative Approach: Involving family members, caregivers, or support workers can provide additional support and guidance during and between sessions.
- Emphasis on the "Here and Now": People with learning disabilities often benefit from a structured, step-by-step approach focused on the present.
- Addressing Skill Deficits: CBT can help individuals develop or improve social skills, communication skills, and other areas where they may have skill deficits, as well as well-being needs.
- Alternative Communication Methods: Using methods like Talking Mats (symbols) or Widgit (symbol-based images) can help individuals express their thoughts and feelings.
- Recognizing Individual Differences: It's important to remember that people with learning disabilities and WS are diverse, and therapy should be tailored to their specific needs and abilities.
- Working with Early Warning Signs: Identifying early warning signs of distress and implementing proactive strategies can help prevent escalation of emotions and challenging behaviours.
- Environmental Considerations: Creating a calm and predictable environment can also be helpful in managing anxiety and promoting positive behaviour - the sensory environment can significantly impact people with WS so this issue is important.

Evidence Base:

- While research is ongoing, there is growing evidence that CBT can be effective for people with learning disabilities including those with WS, particularly for anxiety and depression.
- Studies have shown that CBT can reduce anxiety and improve overall well-being in this population and in associated neurodevelopmental conditions that include individuals with learning disabilities.

Important Considerations:

- CBT is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and therapists need to be flexible and adapt their techniques to suit the individual.
- It's important / useful to assess the individual's cognitive abilities and learning style before implementing CBT.

Links that might be of use

- https://www.ucl.ac.uk/brain-sciences/sites/brain_sciences/files/cbt-id-manual.pdf a therapists guide to CBT for those with LD and mental health challenges
- <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37291991/> a review article on the use of CBT with individuals with LD
- <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-cognitive-behaviour-therapist/article/adapting-cognitive-behaviour-therapy-for-people-with-intellectual-disabilities-an-overview-for-therapist-working-in-mainstream-or-specialist-services/51007B495A75AB4CDAF3DBE38DF0431F> an article on adapting CBT for those with LD
- [How to use this manual](#) a carers guide to CBT for those with LD and mental health challenges

Other Potential Resources:

- Mencap: Mencap's website has a section on mental health and learning disabilities, [What is mental health? | Mencap | Easy Read](#) including information on CBT. [Help with your mental health and wellbeing | Mencap](#)
- The Foundation for people with Learning Disabilities have an easy read resource, The Feeling Down Guide. [Improving access to mental health services for people with learning disabilities | Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities](#)
- NHS Fife: NHS Fife provides a leaflet for carers about depression in people with LD. [Microsoft Word - A Carer's Guide to Anxiety.doc](#)
- Books Beyond Words: Offers easy-read story books about mental health, like "Sonia's Feeling Sad" [Sonia's Feeling Sad — Beyond Words](#) and "Ron's Feeling Blue" [Ron's Feeling Blue — Beyond Words](#)
- The University of Bangor created a mindfulness toolkit for carers supporting a person with a learning disability [Mindfulness-toolkit.pdf](#)
- Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities: Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities provides information on mindfulness for children with LD. [Mindfulness for Kids with LD - Smart Kids](#)