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Patient Education Kit for Migraine

Collaboration between the AHS Complementary and Integrative Medicine
& Behavioral Special Interest Sections

Behavioral Therapies

Behavioral Therapies are an important category of treatment for people living with migraine. Behavioral therapies can change the experience of a person living with migraine with an understanding that there is an interaction between:

- Migraine biology (e.g., genetics, hormones, illness)
- Psychological factors (e.g., anxiety, mood, beliefs, stress)
- Social factors (e.g., family, school, hobbies, society)

When behavioral therapies are included as a part of headache and migraine treatment plans, patients often do better. Benefits may include:

- Fewer migraine attacks¹
- Decreased headache-related disability²
- Decreased reliance on medications²
- Feeling less distress and more in control of migraine²

Research has shown that the following therapies can help people with migraine:

- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** is considered a first-line treatment for migraine prevention. It is a short-term therapy that helps build skills focused on thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and physiologic responses (i.e., how our body feels). This behavioral therapy can reduce headache frequency and help people feel less limited by their headache.^{3,4}
- **Relaxation** skills teach people how to tell the difference between feeling tense and feeling relaxed. Some examples of these skills include diaphragmatic breathing, guided imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation. Practicing relaxation skills can help people lower the stress response in their bodies. These skills are particularly helpful for headache prevention, especially when combined with other kinds of therapies.⁵
- **Biofeedback** is a technique that can be practiced in combination with relaxation. It uses special technological devices to show people elements of their physiology that can be hard to notice alone, like heart rate and muscle tension. By bringing these sensations into awareness, people can work to change them. Biofeedback can lead to fewer and shorter migraine attacks, can help people feel more in-control of headache, and has been shown to be related to less depression and anxiety.⁶

- **Mindfulness-based therapies** (mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction) involve mindfulness, which is the practice of bringing attention to the present moment intentionally and without judgment. These therapies can help change how people experience their migraine attacks, which can make the attacks feel more tolerable and less disabling when they occur. Mindfulness-based therapies can also improve mood and quality of life, as well as help people feel more in-control of their symptoms.^{7,8}
- **Acceptance and Commitment therapy (ACT)** has been used to help many people with chronic pain, and researchers are looking at how this type of treatment can help people with migraine. ACT therapists teach people how to accept life as it is and find happiness in things that are difficult, shifting focus from we wish could be different. Some new studies show that ACT can help people have fewer headaches, feel better about their lives, and feel less held-back by headache.^{9,10}
- **Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)** is a therapeutic approach focused on regulating emotions and tolerating distress. Although there is less research exploring DBT specifically for treating migraine disorders, some research has begun to explore DBT for pain management and associated mood dysregulation. Chronic pain frequently occurs alongside heightened negative emotions, such as fear, anger, worry, and low mood. Some individuals find that learning DBT skills can improve their ability to regulate their emotions associated with pain.¹¹

Individuals with migraine can work with a primary care provider, pediatrician, or neurologist to identify local behavioral therapy options. Therapists trained in behavioral therapies can also be identified by contacting an individual's insurance and asking for information about mental health benefits. Another resource for finding a therapist is www.psychologytoday.com. This website filters clinicians based on location (city or zip code), primary concern (pain management), accepted insurance or out-of-pocket cost per session, types of therapy (CBT), and other personal characteristics (gender, credentials, specialties). Many behavioral therapies are now offered in a telemedicine setting, making them more accessible than ever before!

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