

## Impactful behavioural therapy (IBT) in obesity care

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### Abstract

Intensive behavioural therapy is said to be the first line treatment of obesity. The choice of the adjective 'intensive', however, is open to debate. The term 'impactful behavioural therapy' seems more appropriate for the management of persons living with obesity. This refers to a sustained supportive psychosocial intervention, embedded in routine care, designed to modify existing behaviours, and maintain desired ones, in persons living with obesity, and their caregivers, so as to achieve optimal, sustainable weight. The characteristics and contents of such therapy are described in this communication.

**Keywords:** Behavioural therapy, chronic disease, motivational therapeutics, obesity, overweight, person-centred, psychosocial.

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### Introduction

Intensive behavioural therapy is accepted as a first line therapy for chronic weight management in persons living with obesity.<sup>1</sup> This includes not only information sharing and counselling regarding healthy diet and exercise, but motivation to accept and adhere to healthy practices. Elsewhere, this has been termed as motivational interviewing. The provision of behavioural therapy itself has a beneficial effect on long term health outcomes: this is captured in the terms 'therapeutic patient education' and 'motivational therapeutics'.<sup>2</sup>

### Definition And Description

Intensive behavioural therapy may be defined according to delivery style, content and timing of intervention. It can be delivered face to face or virtually, individually or in groups, by registered dieticians or similarly qualified

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health care professionals. The American Academy of Paediatrics defines low intensity interventions as therapy of < 5 hours, and moderate intensity treatment as 5-25 hours interactions. Effective intensive behavioural therapy programmes "deliver 26 or more hours of face-to-face, family-based counselling on nutrition and physical activity over at least a 3- to 12- month period," for children.<sup>3</sup> Other guidelines such as those of Endocrine Society of India, or Obesity Canada, do not specify a degree or timeframe for 'intensiveness'.<sup>4-6</sup>

In the STEP3 trial, intensive behavioural therapy sessions were conducted weekly for the first 12 weeks, followed by fortnightly for the next 12 weeks. Monthly sessions were then offered for the next 44 weeks, to complete a total of 30 sessions. While the first 3 visits lasted 30-45 minutes, subsequent sessions were of 20-30 minutes duration.<sup>7</sup> The SURMOUNT trial did not specify the duration of their therapeutic sessions.<sup>8</sup> Intensive behavioural therapy has been used in other landmark studies such as the Diabetes Prevention Project (DPP) and Look AHEAD (Action for Health in Diabetes) trials as well.<sup>9,10</sup>

### Practicality

These large multicentric trials, equipped with human resources and logistic support, were designed to assess long term outcomes in an optimal setting. Such facilities may not be available in routine clinical practice. Even in team-based settings, the health care system may not be able to provide intensive support to all persons living with obesity in a sustainable manner. The manpower required to "deliver 26 or more hours of face-to-face, family-based counselling" is simply not available. Thus, the concept of intensive behavioural therapy is not sustainable. As the obesity pandemic grows, this issue will become more and more challenging.

Regulations and rules must be kept in mind while choosing medical terminology. Various countries have laid down criteria for professionals who are qualified to offer behavioural therapy.<sup>11,12</sup> These should be respected.

### Dynamic Definition

The word 'intensive' is an adjective, which means "concentrated on a single subject or into a short time; very thorough or vigorous". In physics, it denotes "a property which is measured in terms of intensity (e.g.

**Table:** Characteristics of impactful behavioral therapy.

<b>MODE OF DELIVERY</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivered by obesity care professionals</li> <li>• Integrated in routine obesity care</li> <li>• Embedded in clinical conversation, at every interaction</li> </ul>
<b>TARGET AND TECHNIQUE</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involving caregivers, as well as persons living with obesity</li> <li>• Realistic suggestions, based on individual strengths and limitations</li> <li>• Structured and ordered as primary, secondary and tertiary behavioural therapy</li> </ul>
<b>CONTENT</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive of diet, physical activity, stress management, sleep hygiene</li> <li>• Inclusive of medication counseling</li> <li>• Inclusive of spirituality, if necessary</li> </ul>
<b>STYLE &amp; STRATEGY</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering post-consultation support through access to patient education</li> <li>• Person-friendly pacing</li> <li>• Mid-course correction/intensification as needed</li> </ul>
<b>SKILL PREREQUISITES</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication skills</li> <li>• Motivational skills</li> <li>• Coping skills</li> </ul>

concentration) rather than of extent (e.g. volume), and so is not simply increased by addition of one thing to another." The term 'impactful' is also an adjective, defined as "having a major impact or effect". The noun impact itself means "a marked effect or influence", while the verb impact denotes "having a strong effect on someone or something;"<sup>13</sup>

We propose Impactful Behavioural Therapy, as a pragmatic alternative to the classic behavioural therapy prescribed in clinical trial settings. We define impactful behavioural therapy (IBT) as a sustained supportive psychosocial intervention, embedded in routine care, designed to modify existing behaviours and maintain desired ones, in persons living with obesity and their caregivers, so as to achieve optimal, sustainable weight. IBT complements other therapies for obesity, and enhances their efficacy, as well as tolerability. It aims to achieve, and maintain, healthy weight related behaviours, so as to optimize weight and health.

### Details And Delineation

Impactful behavioural therapy may be prescribed through a hybrid model of face to face and digital formats. Partly automated and partly personalized advice may be shared through various platforms, including social media and telecommunication channels (Tables 1, 2).

It is difficult to specify frequency and duration of obesity

**Table 2:** Impactful behavioural therapy-levels of hierarchy.

<b>DOMAIN</b>	<b>PRIMARY</b>	<b>SECONDARY</b>	<b>TERTIARY</b>
Stimulus identification	Basics of stimulus identification and control	Stimulus control	Self-awareness mapping
Diet	Healthy eating	Healthy cooking	Culinary skills
Physical activity	Initiation of exercise	Intensification of exercise	Optimization of exercise
Lifestyle & mindstyle	Focus on daily routines	Sleep hygiene	Spirituality
Medication usage	Basic medication counseling	Trouble shooting re: medication usage	Sick day management
Social modulation	Seeking support from caregivers	Creating social networks	Handling difficult social situations; Leadership and advocacy

related clinical interactions. We understand that this is the norm in psychology and psychiatry practices. Obesity, however, is an epidemic, and its management strategies should be tempered by reality. It is neither feasible, nor necessary, to expect mental health professional support for all persons living with obesity. While mental health screening must be done for each and every individual presenting with obesity, referral to a qualified mental health professional should be based on degree of psychosocial dysfunction, and possibility of self-harm.<sup>14</sup>

This does not mean that behavioural therapy should not be offered to all persons living with obesity. Such treatment should be offered by the primary clinician. Behavioural change should be incorporated in every clinical conversation, as should discussion on diet, exercise, stress management and substance abuse.

### Standard Of Care

Obesity management is not an acute affair, or a one-consultation intervention. Obesity is a chronic disease, which requires concerted, continued intervention. Impactful intervention is more apt, as compared to intensive or concentrated treatment. This concept must be formalized, and integrated as part of routine clinical conversation. This standard of care includes not only persons living with obesity, but their care givers as well. It does not obviate the need to offer professional mental health support to those who need it. On the contrary, it ensures that every person living with obesity receives continued psychological support, as part of standard of care.

**Disclaimer:** None.

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