

Five *on* Friday

Musings on Mental Health

[Aaron Tempkin \(Tim\) Beck, MD](#)

By Kathleen M. Pike, PhD
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Brilliant Thinker. Visionary Pioneer. Generous Mentor. Passionate Humanitarian. Tireless Scientist. These accolades are sometimes nothing more than hyperbole.



In the case of Dr. Aaron (Tim) Beck, they don't come close to capturing the extraordinary individual who died on Monday, 1 November 2021, at 100 years of age.

1. Brilliant Thinker. Dr. Beck was widely recognized as the father of Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). He was a giant in our field. He transformed our theoretical models of mental health and developed the essential framework and principles of CBT, an evidence-based psychotherapy that has been demonstrated to be effective across a wide range of mental health conditions. Dr. Beck spent his career developing and testing new ideas until the day he died. He authored more than 600 published articles and nearly two dozen books. It is not an exaggeration to say he revolutionized our understanding of mental health and mental illness.

2. Visionary Pioneer. Dr. Beck began his work as a psychiatrist in the 1960s. Psychoanalysis was the dominant therapeutic approach to caring for individuals with mental disorders at the time. As was the norm, Dr. Beck launched his career with psychoanalytic training. Before long, while working with depressed patients in psychoanalysis, he recognized a common pattern of negative thoughts that seemed to arise spontaneously to cause profound and enduring distress and mental ill-health. Dr. Beck labeled these cognitions “automatic thoughts” and recognized that these negative ideas about oneself, the world, and the future - what he called the “[negative cognitive triad](#)” - sat at the crux of mental disorders like depression and anxiety. It was the beginning of a lifelong commitment to elaborating his [theory and practice of CBT](#).

3. Generous Mentor. I had the enormous privilege of learning from Dr. Beck as a Beck Institute Scholar. Drawing on the fundamental principles of CBT, I led the development of a treatment program to support long-term recovery and prevent relapse for individuals with anorexia nervosa. This [CBT treatment program for anorexia nervosa](#) has demonstrated efficacy and has been implemented around the world. The first time I met with Dr. Beck to present our work and discuss our findings, I feared it would seem like I was telling Elton John how to play the piano. Instead, Dr. Beck listened and asked questions with sincerity and curiosity, setting the tone for an afternoon of discussion and exchange of ideas. He wrapped up our meeting by expressing how much he had learned about eating disorders.

4. Passionate Humanitarian. On another visit, I spoke with Dr. Beck about the work that I was doing to provide CBT training in different parts of the world. We got talking about global work and the application of CBT to social problems. Dr. Beck had already written a book on the topic, [Prisoners of Hate: The Cognitive Basis of Anger, Hostility, and Violence](#). In this book, Dr. Beck tackled social problems from domestic abuse to ethnic conflict and war. In his characteristic mix of curiosity and pragmatism, he applied CBT principles to understanding destructive behavior and remedying these serious social problems. His book outlines the critical psychological underpinnings of such destructive behavior and explores how individuals and societies could be well served by using CBT principles to address the psychological issues that fuel human atrocities like war, genocide, rape, and murder.

5. Tireless Scientist. I had a conversation with Dr. Beck when he was already in his nineties. He had a twinkle in his eye as he spoke about his evolving work with CBT and its adaptation to a recovery-oriented model of cognitive therapy for individuals with serious mental health conditions like schizophrenia. The idea that individuals with psychotic disorders could benefit from psychotherapy is ridiculous to some, but for Dr. Beck this revolutionary work was a natural extension of his tireless commitment to science and advancing knowledge. Dr. Beck’s most recent thinking in this area is represented in his newly published book, [Recovery-Oriented Cognitive Therapy for Serious Mental Health Conditions](#).

Aaron Tempkin (Tim) Beck, MD was a brilliant thinker, visionary pioneer, generous mentor, passionate humanitarian, and tireless scientist. He was also a devoted father. I cannot think of him without his daughter, Dr. Judy Beck, also coming to mind. Clinical psychologist and luminary in her own right, she co-founded the Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy with her father. [In her own words](#), “We now honor my father’s legacy as we continue his work and further his mission of helping individuals live healthier, happier and more meaningful lives.” I feel profoundly grateful and fortunate to have known Dr. Beck. The world is better for his hundred years.