

Challenging Negative Thinking

Thoughts

What are they?

“Thoughts include anything that goes on in your mind. The philosophies you live by, your personal standards and morals, plus the way you think about yourself, others, and the world are all thoughts.”

- CBT for Dummies

What is self-talk?

“Most people don’t realize it, but as we go about our daily lives, we are constantly thinking about and interpreting the situations we find ourselves in. It’s as though we have an internal voice inside our head that determines how we perceive every situation. Psychologists call this inner voice ‘self-talk’, and it includes our conscious thoughts as well as our unconscious assumptions or beliefs.”

- Martin, B. (2010)

Thoughts affect mood

“The thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs you hold have a big effect on the way you interpret the world around you and on how you feel.” In essence, the way you think affects the way that you feel. If your thoughts are positive and motivational in nature, a pleasant mood is sure to follow. Likewise, if your thoughts are negative and despairing, your mood is likely to plummet.

Thoughts are hard to control

You can’t stop thoughts from entering your mind. Your thoughts are simply your *interpretation* of an event or situation and your brain is always interpreting. As such, thoughts will come and go, whether you want them to or not.

Thoughts aren’t facts

The problem with the interpretive nature of thoughts is that we cannot trust them to be 100% accurate. We all have personal biases based on our own individual life experiences that influence our interpretations. Through your interpretation you attach meaning to events, but still, the meaning may not be entirely accurate, realistic, or helpful.

Thoughts can be erroneous

“Thinking errors are slips in thinking that everyone makes from time to time. They prevent you from making accurate assessments of your experiences. They lead you to get to the wrong end of the stick, jump to conclusions, and assume the worst.” Thinking errors are also referred to as cognitive distortions due to their *twisted* and *warped* perspective.

- CBT for Dummies

Thoughts become automatic

ANTs (*automatic negative thoughts*) are the “thoughts that just seem to pop into your head without warning or welcome. Frequently, ANTs are extreme, distorted, and unhelpful ways of interpreting an event or situation, which is why they are referred to as negative. Most people don’t notice their automatic negative ways of thinking in response to negative situations.” The thoughts become so familiar, that you may stop questioning them and whether or not they are accurate or helpful.

- CBT for Dummies

Cognitive Distortions

The following are some of the most common thinking mistakes human beings tend to make. You may not regularly make all of these thinking errors, or you may experience more than of these errors at the same time.

1. **All or nothing thinking** – extreme thinking, seeing things in black and white while completely ignoring the grey; not allowing any room for error; no acknowledgement the middle ground or acceptance of progress.
 Ex: people either love you or hate you; something is either perfect or a disaster; you've either succeeded or failed completely
2. **Overgeneralization** – drawing global conclusions from one or more events. (*Uses words like “always” and “never”, and phrases like “people are...” and “the world’s...”*)
 Ex: your car doesn't start and you think “things like this always happen to me.”
3. **Mental filter** – acknowledging only the information that fits with a certain belief you hold. Information that doesn't fit tends to get ignored.
 Ex: focusing only on the bad from the day, despite the good that happened; you believe you're a failure so you focus only on the mistakes you make while completely overlooking any success or accomplishment
4. **Disqualifying the positive** – transforming a positive event into a neutral or negative event; insisting positive experiences are invalid or “don't count”; the “yeah, but...”
 Ex: you're displeased with your progress and receive feedback that you are doing well; you discredit that in your mind by thinking “she's only saying that because she feels sorry for me.”
5. **Jumping to conclusions** – using a paucity of evidence to reinforce a negative conclusion.
 - a. **Mindreading**: assuming others are thinking negatively about you or have negative motives and intentions. (*You may use body language and facial expressions as “proof.”*)
 - i. You tend to mind-read what you fear most, what you imagine is going on in someone else's mind is very much based on what's already in yours. But, you can **never** know for certain what another person is thinking.
 - b. **Predicting the future**: deciding you know exactly how future situations and events will pan out. (*You may use past events and experiences as “proof.”*)
 - i. This typically stops you from taking action. It can also become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you keep telling yourself you can't do something, you're liable to make that prediction come true.
6. **Catastrophizing** – taking a relatively minor negative event and imagining all sorts of disasters resulting from that one small event. Also known as, making a mountain out of a molehill.
 Ex: misinterpreting a social faux pas as a social disaster, a late arrival as a car accident, or a minor disagreement as total rejection
7. **Emotional reasoning** – relying on your feelings as factual evidence to support negative conclusions; “I feel it therefore it must be true.” With emotional reasoning, you eventually stop looking for contradictory information – or any additional information at all.
 Ex: feeling guilty out of the blue and concluding you must have done something wrong
8. **“Should” statements** – placing extreme and rigid demands on yourself or others using words like “should,” “must,” “ought,” “need,” and “have to”. Don't should all over yourself!
 Ex: you believe you *must* have the approval of your friends and colleagues and thereby end up feeling anxious during most if not all social situations
9. **Labeling/mislabeling** – globally rating things that are too complex for a definitive label (self or others).
 Ex: you receive a poor grade and label yourself as a failure; you get cut off while driving in traffic and label the driver as a jerk
10. **Personalization** – interpreting events as being related to you personally and overlooking other factors.
 Ex: your friend leaves after a hurried “hello” and you think, “He was obviously trying to avoid talking to me, I must have offended him somehow.”

Strategies to Challenge Negative Thoughts

Cognitive distortions can be hard to spot in the moment, but once you do, you can begin to challenge them and develop a more helpful way of thinking.

Resource: <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/07/13/what-to-do-with-worry-thoughts/>



Thoughts are **just** thoughts.

- Negative thoughts are just like tv commercials or internet pop-ups. We don't have to pay attention to them. We can change the channel, turn off the TV or close the internet window, and we can choose to let the negative thoughts float by.



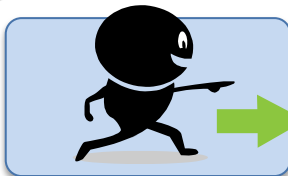
Do something that gives you a sense of accomplishment.

- Negative thoughts just help you to (quickly) beat yourself up about anything (and everything). Physically shift your focus by working on something that will provide you with a sense of mastery; this can push the negativity right out.



Put your worries to good use.

- A lot of negative thinking and rumination is typically unproductive. We worry (a lot) about the things that are "wrong" but we never identify what we can do to "fix" them. Use your brain power to problem-solve potential solutions to your problems.



Best, worst, and most-likely.

- When you are consumed by the potential outcome of a situation, ask yourself: "what's the **best** thing that could happen, what's the **worst**, and what's **most likely**?" This helps you to hope for the best, be prepared for the worst, and be comfortable with some combination of the two.



Get perspective.

- There is always more than one explanation for the same event. When your perspective is unfavorable, challenge yourself to look for another potential explanation for what happened. Stick with the one that gives you peace of mind and allows you to get on with your day.



Prove it wrong.

- Our thoughts are not always **fact**! When you are stuck in a defeating thought pattern, identify the "proof" that makes the thought false.



Talk with someone.

- When we stay alone with our negative thoughts, they can become overwhelming and very difficult to challenge. This becomes much easier when we are around others.



Positive self-talk.

- Let's face it, most of us would never speak to another person the way we speak to ourselves (especially when we make mistakes). Practice using positive self-talk to increase your confidence, strength, and motivation. Be your own cheerleader!

Questions to ask

To help identify thinking errors:

- Am I jumping to the worst possible conclusion?
- Am I thinking in extreme – all-or-nothing – terms?
- Am I using words like “always” and “never” to draw generalized conclusions from a specific event?
- Am I predicting the future instead of waiting to see what happens?
- Am I jumping to conclusions about what other people are thinking of me?
- Am I focusing on the negative and overlooking the positive?
- Am I discounting the positive information or twisting a positive into a negative?
- Am I globally putting myself down as a failure, worthless, or useless?
- Am I listening too much to my negative gut feelings instead of looking at the objective facts?
- Am I taking an event or someone’s behavior too personally or blaming myself and overlooking other factors?
- Am I using words like “should,” “must,” “ought,” and “have to” in order to make rigid rules about myself, the world, or other people?

To help find evidence that does not support the thinking error(s):

- Have I had any experiences that show that this thought is not completely true all of the time?
- If my best friend or someone I loved had this thought, what would I tell them?
- If my best friend or someone who loves me knew I was thinking this thought, that would they say to me? What evidence would they point out to me that would suggest my thoughts were not 100% true?
- When I am not feeling this way, do I think about this type of situation any differently? How?
- When I have felt this way in the past, what did I think about that helped me feel better?
- Have I been in this type of situation before? Is there anything different between this situation and a previous one? What have I learned from previous experiences that could help me now?
- Are there any small things that contradict my thoughts that I might be discounting?
- Five years from now will I look at this situation differently? Will I focus on a different part of my experience?
- Are there any strengths or positives in me or the situation that I am ignoring?
- Am I jumping to any conclusions that are not completely justified by the evidence?
- Am I blaming myself for something over which I do not have complete control?

Beliefs that will not cause problems

- **Everyone doesn’t have to love me**
Not everyone has to love me or even like me. I don’t necessarily like everyone that I know, so why expect everyone will like me? I enjoy being liked and loved, but if someone doesn’t like me, I will still be OK. I cannot “make” someone like me, nor can someone get me to like them. I don’t need approval all the time.
- **It is OK to make mistakes**
Making mistakes is something we all do, and I am still a fine and worthwhile person when I make mistakes. There is no reason for me to get upset when I make a mistake. Making mistakes shows that I am trying, and I will continue trying despite them. Making mistakes is a way for me to learn to change my behavior. I can handle a mistake. It is ok for others to make mistakes, too. I can and will accept mistakes in myself and others.

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- **I don't have to control things**

I will survive if things are different than what I want them to be. I can accept things the way they are, people the way they are, and myself the way I am. There is no reason to get upset if I can't change things to fit my idea of how they ought to be. There is no requirement to like everything. Even if I don't like it, I can live with it.

- **I am responsible for my day**

I am responsible for how I feel and for what I do. Nobody can make me feel anything. If I have a rotten day, I am the one who allowed it to be that way. If I have a great day, I am the one who deserves credit for being positive. It is not the responsibility of other people to change so I can feel better. I am the one who is in charge of my life.

Testing Your Thoughts

1. What is the situation? _____

2. What am I thinking or imagining? _____

3. How much do I believe it? A little Medium A lot
4. How does that make me feel? _____
5. How strong is the feeling? A little Medium A lot
6. What makes me think the thought is true? _____

7. What makes me think the thought is not true, or not completely true? _____

8. What is another way to look at this situation? _____

9. What is the worst that could happen? Would I live through it? _____

10. What is the best that could happen? _____

11. What will most likely happen? _____

12. What will happen if I keep telling myself the same thought? _____

13. What could happen if I change my thinking? _____

14. What would I tell my friend if this happened to him/her? _____

15. What am I going to do now? _____

16. How much do I believe the negative thought now? A little Medium A lot
17. How strong is the feeling now? A little Medium A lot

Keeping Track of Your Thoughts

Recording your thoughts can help you to challenge them. Use the forms below to help.

Complete Thought Record

Situation 1

Situation 2

Situation Who were you with? What were you going? When was it? Where were you?		
Mood(s) & Rating Describe your mood(s) in one word. Rate the intensity of the mood on a scale of 1 – 10.		
Automatic Thoughts What was going through your mind? What meaning did you give to the situation?		
Evidence to Support the Thought Pick one or two thoughts from the previous row, and identify the factual evidence to support that conclusion.		
Evidence to Oppose the Thought Using the same thoughts as above, identify the evidence which proves the thought wrong .		
Alternative/Balanced Thoughts Write out an alternative or balanced thought to take the place of the automatic thought.		
Current Mood Rating Rate your moods once again on a scale of 1 – 10. Have they changed?		

Cognitive Restructuring: Thought Monitoring Form

Date	Situation	Automatic Thought	Belief	Thinking Error
When did this take place?	What was happening at the time?	What thoughts were running through your mind?	How strongly do you believe in the thought? (1 – 100%)	Use list of <i>Cognitive Distortions</i> to help identify the type of thinking error.

Cognitive Restructuring: Thought Challenging Form

Rational Response

Date Copy date from previous form.	Automatic Thought Rating Copy belief in thought rating from previous form. (1 – 100%)	What is the evidence? What alternative views are there? What are the advantages/disadvantages of this way of thinking? What logical errors are being made? Am I thinking in black and white terms? Are there “grey areas” being ignored? Am I making negative statements about myself based on one (or a few) events? Am I focusing on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths? Am I exaggerating the importance of a negative? Am I considering the full implication of a positive? Am I taking responsibility for something that is not my fault? Am I jumping to conclusions?	Belief in Rational Response How much do you believe the rational response? (1 – 100%)