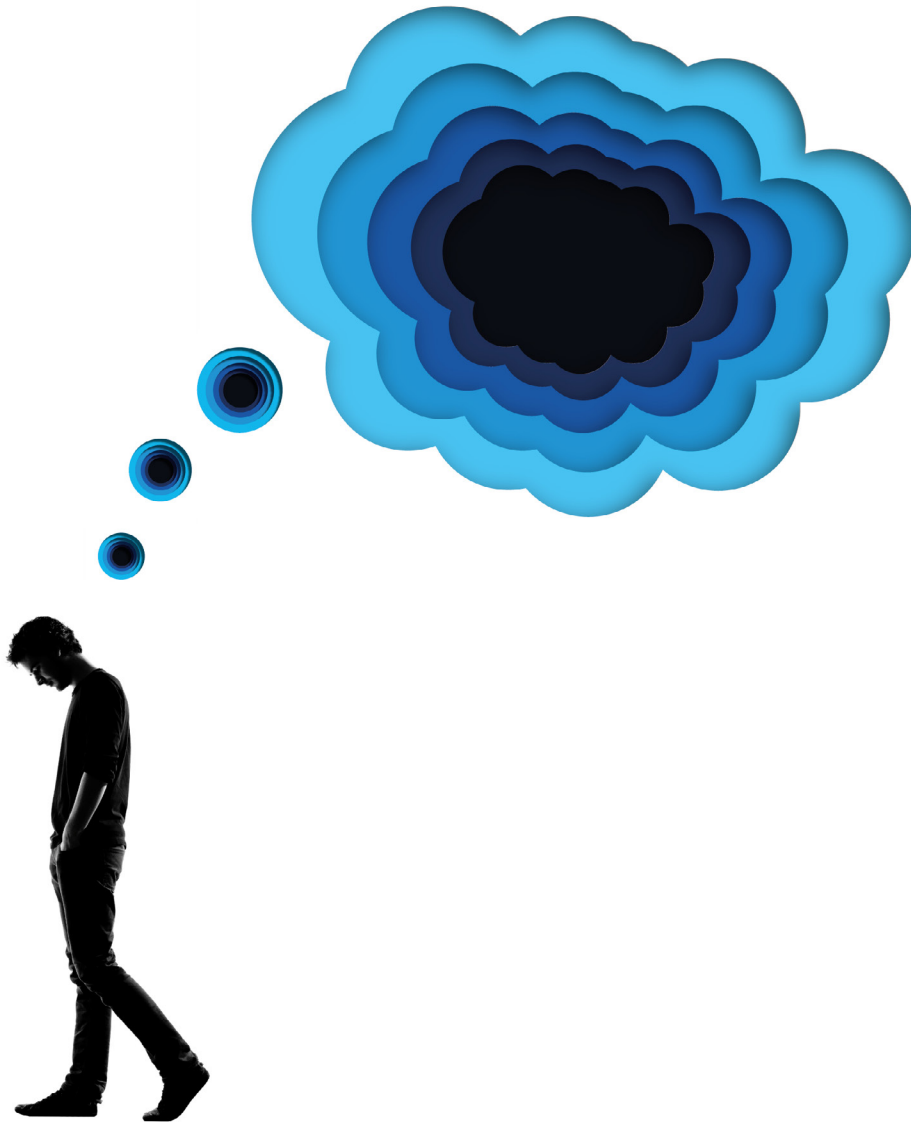


**Guide**

US English

# Challenging Your Negative Thinking



# Challenging Your Negative Thinking

Thinking is wonderful. Our ability to think means that we can plan, prepare, imagine and fantasize. But thinking can cause us problems too – we can worry, compare, and catastrophize. Many people feel overwhelmed by their thoughts, and problems including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, paranoia, and pain all have a lot to do with the way we think. Thinking can literally make us sick. In his book *Why zebras don't get ulcers* <sup>[1]</sup> the biologist Robert Sapolsky says:

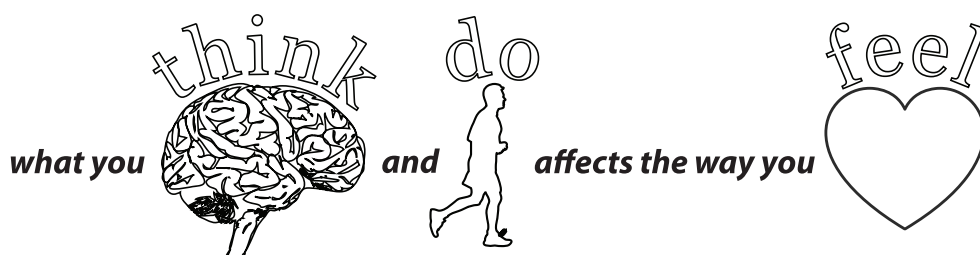
*A large body of evidence suggests that stress-related disease emerges, predominantly, out of the fact that we so often activate a physiological system that has evolved for responding to acute physical emergencies, but we turn it on for months on end, worrying about mortgages, relationships, and promotions.*

This guide is designed to teach you some methods that cognitive behavioral therapists use to record and change the way you think. By the end of this guide you will:

- Understand why thoughts can cause us problems.
- Know how to record your automatic thoughts.
- Have learned some helpful ways of challenging your thinking.

## A CBT introduction to thinking

The key message of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is that the way we think (our cognitions) and what we do (our behavior) affects the way we feel. It follows that if we want to change the way we feel then we will need to make changes to the way we think and act.



**Figure:** What you think and do affects the way you feel.

Everybody has thousands of thoughts per day. Some are helpful and uplifting (e.g. “*I’m glad I did that*”, “*I really like being here*”), and some are more downbeat (e.g. “*I’ll never be able to do this*”, “*I’m a waste of space*”). More importantly, some are accurate (e.g. “*I really messed up that time*”) and others are untrue (e.g. “*I’m completely useless*”).

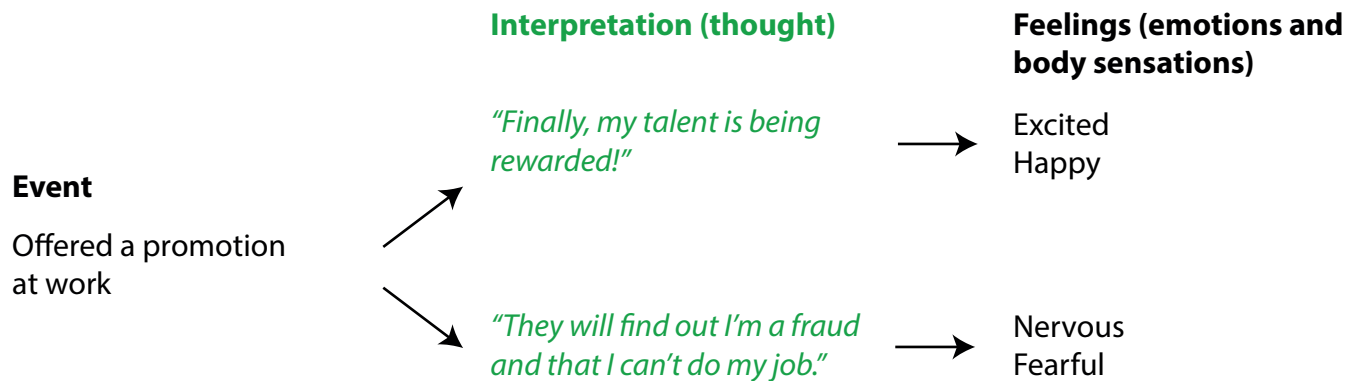
CBT has a lot to say about thoughts. In summary:

*It is not events that bother us, instead it is the way that we interpret them (the thoughts that we have about them).*

This is a famous idea that was actually around for a long time before CBT was developed. Nearly 2000 years ago the Greek philosopher Epictetus said:

*Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things.*

This idea is helpful because it explains why people experiencing the same event can react in completely different ways.



**Figure:** How we interpret an event determines how we feel about it.

We can *always* interpret a situation in different ways. This message was summarized most powerfully by Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi death camps:

*Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.*

Thoughts are not facts

Not all of the thinking that happens in our heads is slow, careful, deliberate, or accurate. In his best-selling book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* Daniel Kahneman describes experiments that show the 'short cuts' our brains often prefer to take. When faced with a problem we *can* choose to respond carefully by thinking of possible solutions and then examining the advantages and disadvantages of each, or we might just have a quick and automatic hunch about how to solve it. It turns out that our brains are surprisingly lazy and bias often creeps into our thinking. Key things that you need to know are:

- We all have quick and automatic thoughts that just 'pop' into our minds.
- These automatic thoughts are often based on assumptions.
- Automatic thoughts are often very believable, but they can be inaccurate.
- In summary: thoughts are not facts.

Different kinds of biases can lead to different kinds of problems

We all have our own 'favored' biases. Perhaps you have met 'that person' who thinks that they are amazing, and never acknowledges their mistakes or flaws. Or perhaps you've met the converse – the friend who is always critical of themselves, no-matter their actual achievement. Different kinds of biases are associated with different problems:

- **Catastrophizing** > Seeing the worst in situations or people can lead to us feeling anxious
- **Excluding the positive** > Discounting the positive (writing it off, making excuses for it) can leave us feeling low
- **Personalization** > The automatic tendency to blame ourselves for anything that goes wrong (self criticism) can leave us feeling sad and anxious.

## Introducing cognitive restructuring

To sum up what we have learned so far: the core message of CBT is that

| *what you think affects how you feel*

And there is a lot of evidence that

| *our thinking can be biased*

And we know that

| *different biases lead to different emotional problems*

It follows that we need to get a grip on how we think. Psychologists call the process of changing how we think *cognitive restructuring*. CBT therapists will teach cognitive restructuring techniques to clients suffering from a wide range of problems.

A warning: the goal of cognitive restructuring in CBT is not just to 'think happy thoughts'

(sadly this doesn't work) but instead it is to think *accurately*. It is not about getting rid of 'bad' emotions – for example if someone hurts you then it's right to feel angry – but it is about *seeing things as they are* and interpreting events accurately. Interpreting events accurately (overcoming our biases) gives us the best chance of acting appropriately.

In this guide we are going to practice some different ways of changing the way we think. We will teach you how to do this in stages.

- **Stage 1:** Recording (catching) your thoughts.
- **Stage 2:** Changing (restructuring) your thoughts. We will practice three different ways of challenging and restructuring your thoughts.

## Recording your thoughts and feelings

The first step in changing what we think is to know what we are thinking in the first place. To ‘catch’ your automatic thoughts you need to start paying attention to what is going through your mind: particularly at times when you notice a change in how you are feeling. When you notice an unpleasant feeling the most important question that you can ask yourself is:

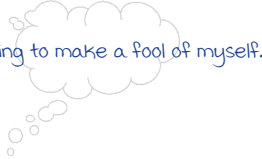
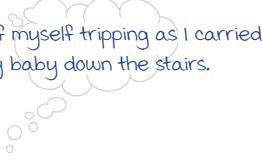
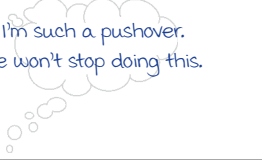

| *What was going through my mind just then?*

When they start to ask themselves this question some people notice that they have a lot of verbal thoughts – these thoughts can be like a little sentence of words in your mind (e.g. “*I’m going to mess this up!*”). Other people notice that their thoughts are in the form of images (e.g. they might have a mental image of their face going red in public and embarrassing themselves). Whatever it is that goes through your mind the important thing is to write it down as soon as possible after you notice it. Writing it down quickly means that you are less likely to forget or dismiss the thought – many people find it very powerful to see their thoughts written down.

Psychologists use a tool called a *thought record* or a *thought monitoring record* to help their clients to catch their thoughts. You can use the Psychology Tools *Simple Thought Monitoring Record* to guide you through the steps of catching your automatic thoughts. This worksheet has three columns to help you collect information about:

- The **situation** the thought happened in.
- The **thought** (or image).
- How you **felt** (emotions and body sensations).

**Simple Thought Monitoring Record**

<p><b>Situation</b> Who were you with? What were you doing? Where were you? When did it happen?</p>	<p><b>Emotions &amp; body sensations</b> What did you feel? (Rate the intensity of your feelings 0–100%)</p>	<p><b>Thoughts</b> What was going through your mind as you started to feel this way? (Thoughts, images, or memories)</p>
<p>Out with friends. Thursday evening – 19:00.</p>	<p>Anxious – 80%</p>	<p>I'm going to make a fool of myself.</p> 
<p>Monday – 11:30. Looking after my baby at home. On my own.</p>	<p>Anxious – 95% Stomach lurched.</p>	<p>Image of myself tripping as I carried my baby down the stairs.</p> 
<p>Friday – 16:00. At work – my boss asked me to take on some extra work again with a short deadline and I said yes even though I'd have to stay late.</p>	<p>Sad, low, tearful – 70%</p>	<p>I'm such a pushover. He won't stop doing this.</p> 
		

**Figure:** An example of a simple thought monitoring record designed for catching thoughts.

When should I complete a thought record?

The best time to complete a thought record is just after you notice a change in how you are feeling. A sudden shift in your emotions is a sign that you have had a thought about something or have interpreted an event in a particular way. Writing your thought down quickly ensures that the incident is still fresh in your mind and makes it more likely that you will be able to recall the important details. Don't worry if you can't complete a thought record straight away – but when you complete it later take your time to imagine the incident clearly in your mind as this will help you to recall the details you need.

What do I need to record in the 'situation' column?

The first step in completing a thought record is to note down some information about



the situation or context in which you noticed the change in your emotions. Recording this information will help you to recall the event clearly at a later date, and will help you (and your therapist) to understand more about this event, and about what your particular triggers are. Some suggestions for helpful information to record in the situation column include:

- Make a note of the date & time.
- Record where you were.
- Note who you were with.
- Summarize what was happening *just before* you noticed a change in how you were feeling.

What should I record in the 'emotions and body sensations' column?

The next step is to describe your emotions and body sensations. Some good questions to ask yourself are:

*What was the shift in emotion that prompted me to complete a thought record?*

*What sensations in my body did I become aware of?*

A rapid change in your emotion or your body often indicates that you had a thought about something (regardless of whether you were immediately aware of it or not). You might find it helpful to:

- Remember that emotions can generally be described using one word (e.g. Angry, Sad, Excited).
- Rate the strength of the emotion on a scale of 0-100% (if you recorded more than one emotion give a separate rating for each).
- Record what you felt in your body (e.g. “*I felt butterflies in my stomach*”).

What should I record in the 'thoughts' column?

Finally you need to record the thoughts (or images) that you had at the time – particularly those which went through your mind just before the change in how you were feeling. Helpful questions to ask yourself include: *"What was going through my mind in that moment?"*

- *"What was I saying to myself?"*
- *"Did I have an image / picture / memory in my mind?"* If you did: *"What did it mean? What does it say about you?"*
- *"What implications did that situation have for me or my future?"*

Once you have recorded your thought(s), rate the believability of them on a scale of 0-100%, where 0 = *"I don't believe it at all"* to 100 = *"I believe it completely"*.

This is harder than it looks, should I be able to do it right away?

Recording your thoughts *is* harder than it looks. Most of us are in the habit of just going about our lives and accepting what our thoughts are telling us. Recording your thoughts is a skill, and is one that you will get better at with practice. Many people find it helpful to use thought record forms to start with, but as they practice they find that can record their thoughts in other ways too.

Should I be recording every thought?

No, you'll get overwhelmed if you try to record everything. Start by recording your thoughts at the times when you notice obvious changes in your emotions. As a guide, when a CBT therapist is working with a client they will often encourage them to record a few thoughts per day for a week, and then they will examine the results together to see what patterns they notice. You can do something similar – keep thought records for a week then take some time to reflect on what you have recorded.

## Challenging your thoughts 1: Perspective-taking

Remember, the goal of CBT is not to ‘think happy thoughts’ but is instead to think accurately. Our thinking can become biased but it is within our power to change the way we think. Identifying your automatic thoughts is the first step in managing your mind. Now that you can reliably catch your automatic thoughts you can examine them to see how accurate they are, and to see how fair you are being with yourself.

One good initial way of challenging your thinking is to practice looking at a situation that has upset you from different perspectives. You can use the Psychology Tools *Perspective-Taking* worksheet to guide you through these necessary steps.

### Perspective-Taking

<b>Situation that bothered you</b> Who were you with? What were you doing? Where were you? When did it happen?	<b>How did you feel?</b> What did you feel in that situation? (Rate intensity 0–100%)	<b>Interpretation / Thought</b> How did you interpret what happened? What went through your mind?	<b>Alternative viewpoint</b> Try to interpret that situation differently. Use the prompts below.
<p>Parents talking to me over dinner about how the job-hunting was going. I thought that Dad sounded cross with me.</p> <p>Was sat with a friend who was telling me about their problems.</p>	<p>Tense, angry, pathetic, ashamed.</p> <p>Frustrated.</p>	<p>They think I'm a waste of space and want me out of their house.</p> <p>When are they going to stop talking about themselves? I must mean nothing to them for them not to even ask how I'm doing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Someone who truly liked themselves would be ok with what they're doing, and wouldn't worry about what other people think.</li> <li>• When I'm 80 this won't even figure in my life. I'll probably miss being told off by my parents.</li> <li>• I know for a fact she cares about me – she's a good person and doesn't mean anything by it.</li> <li>• Finn would say "That's just Ashley – she doesn't have an 'off' switch".</li> <li>• Batman would tell me to fight crime and interrupt her!</li> </ul> <p>• What other ways are there of looking at this situation?                      • What would a friend say to me about this?                      • What would Batman say to me?                      • Name 3 good outcomes that might come from this event.                      • When you're aged 80 and looking back on this event will it still bother you?                      • What would someone who truly liked themselves think in this situation?</p>

**Figure:** The *Perspective-Taking* worksheet. You will find blank copies at the back of this guide.

## **1. Record information about the situation that bothered you**

Note down some information about the situation or context in which you noticed the change in your emotions. Some suggestions for helpful information to record in the situation column include:

- Make a note of the date & time
- Record where you were
- Note who you were with
- Summarize what was happening **just before** you noticed a change in how you were feeling.

## **2. Record how you felt**

Briefly describe the emotions and body sensations that you were aware of. Rate the intensity of these on a 0-100% scale.

## **3. Identify the thought**

Identify the thought you want to work on and write it down. Only work on one thought at a time. (If you had an image rather than a verbal thought ask yourself *"what does that say about me?"* and use that answer as your thought).

## **4. Consider other perspectives**

Take a mental step back from the thought and try to consider other perspectives. You could ask yourself:

- *"What is another way of looking at this situation?"*
- *"What would a friend say to me about this?"*
- *"What would Batman say to me?"*
- *"Will I even remember this problem in ten years' time?"*
- *"How would I respond to this situation if I had no fear?"*

## **5. Reflect on how you are feeling**

Compared to how you felt when you first wrote the thought how do you feel now? What do you notice about this process of trying to look at the situation from different points of view?

## Challenging your thoughts 2: Putting your thought on trial

Another helpful way of challenging your thinking is to hold an imaginary court case and put your thoughts on trial. Your thought is in the ‘dock’, the defense are arguing that it is true, and the prosecution are arguing that it is false. Your job is to be the defense, prosecution, and judge!

You can use the Psychology Tools *Court Trial Thought Challenging Record* worksheet to guide you through these steps necessary to put your thought on trial.

**Court Trial – Thought Challenging Record** 

**Put your thought in the dock**  
What is the negative thought that is troubling you?  
*I'm bad and dangerous* 

**Defence**  
What evidence suggests that this thought is true?  
What facts would a defence barrister use to convince the jury that this thought is accurate?  
*I get images in my head of bad things happening to people – why would I even think things like that unless I was bad?  
When I didn't finish my counting ritual properly my aunt got hurt.  
I've said cruel things to my parents, especially my mum.* 

**Prosecution**  
What evidence suggests that this thought is false?  
What facts would a prosecution barrister use to discredit this thought?  
*I haven't hurt anyone on purpose – there's a difference between 'accidental' and 'on purpose'.  
My therapist said that the unwanted images in my mind are really normal, and the fact that I worry about hurting people makes me quite different from proper psychopaths – they really don't care about other people.  
I volunteer at an animal shelter because I care about the animals – that's not unkind.* 

**Jury**  
 The jury's job is to weigh up the evidence for and against the thought  
They have to set aside their feelings and make a balanced judgement based on the evidence presented. 

**Verdict**  
Given all of the evidence presented what do you think of the original thought now?  
What is a balanced and realistic way of looking at the thought now?  
Sum up your new way of thinking.  
*There is still a part of me that worries that I'm dangerous – I do still feel anxious in some situations. But I need to remember what I've talked about with my therapist – the fact that I worry so much is a strong sign that I'm a kind person who cares about people. I've thought that I'm bad for a long time so it might take a while to change this habit of thinking.* 

**Figure:** The *Court Trial Thought Challenging Record* worksheet. You will find blank copies at the back of this guide.

### **1. Put your thought in the dock (choose a thought)**

Identify the thought you want to work on and write it down. As a rule it is best to work on one thought at a time. If you had an image rather than a verbal thought ask yourself *"What does that say about me?"* and use that answer as your thought. If your original thought was in the form of a question (e.g. *"Why am I so stupid?"*), then turn it into a statement (e.g. *"I am so stupid"*).

### **2. Defense: Record evidence suggesting the thought is true**

Put yourself in the shoes of the defense barrister. Your job is to argue that the thought is true. Make a list of all the reasons why that thought might be true. Some of these reasons might be better than others, but don't censor anything – just write them all down. Keep asking yourself *"What is the evidence that makes me think this thought is true?"*

### **3. Prosecution: Record evidence suggesting the thought is false**

Now put yourself in the shoes of the prosecution barrister. Your job is to argue that the thought is false. Make a list of all the reasons why this thought might not be 100% true all of the time. You might find it helpful to ask yourself:

- *"If a friend thought this about themselves, what would I say to them?"*
- *"When was the last occasion that I had a thought like this that wasn't true?"*
- *"What facts or evidence make me suspect that this isn't completely true?"*
- *"Have there ever been any times when this wasn't true?"*
- *"If I looked back on this thought in 20 years what would I say to myself?"*

### **4. Present the case to the jury: Read everything (out loud if you can)**

The next job is to present the case to the jury. Read the original thought, all of the reasons why it might be true, and all of the reasons why it might not be true. Do this out loud if you can.

## 5. Verdict: Summarize what you have done

The job now is to come to a verdict. Say to yourself *"Given all of the evidence, what is the fairest way of summing up this situation?"* and write down your new thought. Some helpful questions include:

- "Is there a more helpful way of thinking about myself or this situation?"
- "Have I been judging myself harshly? Is there a fairer, more balanced way of summing this up?"
- "Is there a way of thinking about this now that is more likely to help me achieve my goals?"

Courts often use one of two ways to decide whether the evidence presented in a case is convincing. Read them and think about how strong the evidence is for your original thought and your new summary:

- Beyond reasonable doubt: when this standard is applied no reasonable person would doubt the verdict
- On the balance of probabilities: this standard is less stringent and says that the evidence for one side is more likely than the other

## 6. Reflect

After having put your thought through that court case, what do you notice about your thoughts and emotions?

## Challenging your thoughts 3: Examining evidence for and against the thought

This last method we will explore is the 'traditional CBT way' of testing whether a thought is accurate. It is called examining the evidence for and against the thought. It is similar to the previous method (putting your thought on trial) but uses different language.

You can use the Psychology Tools *Thought Challenging Record – 7 Column* worksheet to guide you through these steps to examine the evidence for and against a thought.

**Thought Challenging Record – 7 Column**

Situation	Emotion or feeling <small>(Rate intensity 0–100%)</small>	Automatic thought	Evidence that supports the thought	Evidence that does not support the thought	Alternative (balanced) thought <small>(Rate degree of belief 0–100%)</small>	Emotion or feeling <small>(Rate intensity 0–100%)</small>
At home alone with no plans (Saturday night 7pm).	Hopeless 80% Dejected 80%	I'm a loser. I'm such a failure. <u>I'm pathetic.</u>	I didn't ask out that person I like at work even though I had an opportunity.  I'm 32 and living alone.  I haven't had a proper relationship for five years.  I'm working in a job I don't like.	my friends would tell me not to be so hard on myself.  Relationships aren't everything – I've had to concentrate on other areas of my life like my mom's illness so haven't had much time for them.  I've got a job which is better than some of my friends – and even though I don't like it I am good at it and it pays the bills.	When I'm feeling low I often judge myself really harshly. Life isn't going how I want it to at the moment but these feelings tell me that I need to make some changes. It's obvious to me now that I really value being in a relationship so that's what I'm going to focus on.	Hopeful 20%
<small>Where were you? What were you doing? Who were you with? When did it happen?</small>	<small>Record emotions and body sensations</small>	<small>What thoughts, images, or memories were going through your mind? If it was an image or memory, what did it mean to you?</small>	<small>What facts support the truthfulness of this thought?</small>	<small>What experiences indicate that this thought is not completely true all of the time? Are there any small experiences which contradict this thought?</small>	<small>Write a new thought which takes into account the evidence for and against the original thought</small>	<small>How do you feel about the situation now?</small>

**Figure:** The *Thought Challenging Record – 7 Column* worksheet. You will find blank copies at the back of this guide.



## 1. Situation

Note down some information about the situation or context in which you noticed the change in your emotions. Some suggestions for helpful information to record in the situation column include:

- Make a note of the date & time
- Record where you were
- Note who you were with
- Summarize what was happening **just before** you noticed a change in how you were feeling

## 2. Emotion or feeling

Briefly describe the emotions and body sensations that you were aware of. Rate the intensity of these on a 0-100% scale.

## 3. Automatic thought

Identify the thought you want to work on and write it down. Only work on one thought at a time. If you had an image rather than a verbal thought ask yourself *"what does that say about me?"* and use that answer as your thought. If your original thought was in the form of a question (e.g. *"Why am I so stupid?"*) then turn it into a statement (e.g. *"I am so stupid"*).

## 4. Rate your belief

Give the thought an initial belief rating. How strongly do you believe in the truthfulness of that thought right now? (0% = not at all, 100% = completely).

## 5. Record evidence for the thought

Next, make a list of all the reasons why that thought might be true. Some of these reasons might be better than other, but don't censor anything – just write them all down. Keep asking yourself *"What is the evidence that makes me think this thought is true?"*

## 6. Record evidence against the thought

Now make a list of all the reasons why this thought might not be 100% true all of the time. You might find it helpful to ask yourself:

- *"If a friend thought this about themselves, what would I say to them?"*
- *"When was the last occasion that I had a thought like this that wasn't true?"*
- *"What facts or evidence make me suspect that this isn't completely true?"*
- *"Have there ever been any times when this wasn't true?"*
- *"If I looked back on this thought in 20 years what would I say to myself?"*

## 7. Read everything (out loud if you can)

Now read the original thought, all of the reasons why it might be true, and all of the reasons why it might not be true. Do this out loud if you can –many people find this a helpful way of getting some distance from their thought.

## 8. Alternative thought: Summarize what you have done

Say to yourself *"Given all of the evidence, is there a better way of summing up this situation?"* and write down your new thought.

- *"Is there a more helpful way of thinking about myself or this situation?"*
- *"Have I been judging myself harshly? Is there a fairer, more balanced way of summing this up?"*
- *"Is there a way of thinking about this now that is more likely to help me achieve my goals?"*

## 9. Re-rate your emotion and belief

When you read the new thought (step 8), rate how strongly you believe in the new thought and your old thought right now (0-100%). What emotions do you feel now? What do you notice?

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# Simple Thought Monitoring Record

<b>Situation</b> Who were you with? What were you doing? Where were you? When did it happen?	<b>Emotions &amp; body sensations</b> What did you feel? (Rate the intensity of your feelings 0–100%)	<b>Thoughts</b> What was going through your mind as you started to feel this way? (Thoughts, images, or memories)
		
		
		
		

# Perspective-Taking

<b>Situation that bothered you</b> Who were you with? What were you doing? Where were you? When did it happen?	<b>How did you feel?</b> What did you feel in that situation? (Rate intensity 0–100%)	<b>Interpretation / Thought</b> How did you interpret what happened? What went through your mind?	<b>Alternative viewpoint</b> Try to interpret that situation differently Use the prompts below
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What other ways are there of looking at this situation?</li><li>• What would a friend say to me about this?</li><li>• What would Batman say to me?</li><li>• Name 3 good outcomes that might come from this event</li><li>• When you're aged 80 and looking back on this event will it still bother you?</li><li>• What would someone who truly liked themselves think in this situation?</li></ul>



## Put your thought in the dock

What is the negative thought that is troubling you?



## Defence

What evidence suggests that this thought is true?

What facts would a defence barrister use to convince the jury that this thought is accurate?



## Prosecution

What evidence suggests that this thought is false?

What facts would a prosecution barrister use to discredit this thought?



## Jury

The jury's job is to weigh up the evidence for and against the thought  
They have to set aside their feelings and make a balanced judgement  
based on the evidence presented



## Verdict

Given all of the evidence presented what do you think of the original thought now?

What is a balanced and realistic way of looking at the thought now?

Sum up your new way of thinking



# Thought Challenging Record – 7 Column

Situation	Emotion or feeling <small>(Rate intensity 0–100%)</small>	Automatic thought	Evidence that supports the thought	Evidence that does not support the thought	Alternative (balanced) thought <small>(Rate degree of belief 0–100%)</small>	Emotion or feeling <small>(Rate intensity 0–100%)</small>
<p>Where were you? What were you doing? Who were you with? When did it happen?</p>	<p>Record emotions and body sensations</p>	<p>What thoughts, images, or memories were going through your mind? If it was an image or memory, what did it mean to you?</p>	<p>What facts support the truthfulness of this thought?</p>	<p>What experiences indicate that this thought is not completely true all of the time? Are there any small experiences which contradict this thought?</p>	<p>Write a new thought which takes into account the evidence for and against the original thought</p>	<p>How do you feel about the situation now?</p>