



NHS Fife Department of Psychology

Negative Thinking

CBT Tools

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Negative Thinking

Negative thoughts are associated with negative feelings such as sadness, anxiety, anger, and hopelessness. Often we are not aware of our negative thoughts as they occur automatically, seem reasonable and believable. The worse we feel, the more likely we are to think negatively and believe these thoughts to be true, even though they are unreasonable and unrealistic. Negative thoughts are experienced by all of us at at some time but are more prevalent and extreme whenever we feel stressed, anxious, irritable or depressed.

Thought Traps

There are different types of common negative thought patterns known as *Thought Traps* that occur whenever we thinking negatively. The type of thought traps may vary depending on our mood and the particular situation that we are in at any given time, Some example are given below. Learning to recognise these thought traps is the first step in overcoming them.

Mind reading: Believing that you know what another is thinking.

Example: "He thinks I'm a loser."

Labelling: Calling yourself or others names in an unduly negative way.

Example: "I'm a failure," "He's an idiot," "I'm useless".

Fortune telling: Making negative predictions about the future

Example: "I'll get rejected," "I'll make a fool of myself."

Catastrophising: Predicting the absolute worst case scenario, 'making a mountain out of a molehill'.

Example: A loved one is home late from work, imagining there has been a terrible accident and they have been taken to hospital, or worse – they have died.

Overgeneralising: if something didn't work out once, assuming it never will.

Example: If you have been working hard one day but don't quite finish everything, you may think "I've got nothing done" and this deprives you from a sense of achievement for what you have done.

All-or-Nothing Thinking: seeing things as being either, or.

Example: black or white with no shades of grey, success or failure, good or bad.

Ignoring the Positives: focusing on the negative in a situation rather than seeing the whole picture.

Example: You have done well in a task at work, but you keep focusing on earlier mistakes. You have good friends that have known you for years but you focus on the friendships that didn't work out.

Emotional Reasoning: using your emotions or mood as a means of interpreting what's happening around you

Example: I feel uptight so something dreadful is about to happen

Personalising: taking things personally, assuming responsibility

Example: My neighbour did not speak to me this morning, therefore I must have done something to upset them; or my boss is irritable today so I must have annoyed her.

Shoulds and Musts: assuming that things *have to* be a certain way, that we have to abide by certain rules

Example: I should always give everything I do 100%, I must not fail, or I must not be rude so other should not be either.

Challenging Thought Traps

When you are able to identify the common negative Thought Traps you can then challenge these by applying a more rational, balanced approach to our thinking. Searching for evidence that a particular thought trap is true can be an effective challenge for most thought traps.

Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts

Why is it a Good Idea to Challenge Negative Thoughts?

One of the first things people do when they are experiencing a lot of negative thoughts is to try and **not** think about them, or push them out of their mind. However, this doesn't always work. In fact the more you try **not** to think about something the more it can intrude into your mind. The following pages show you five ways to challenge unhelpful thoughts.

1.) What are the chances...

'putting your money where your mouth is'

This challenge assumes that the things you worry about are unlikely to happen. It asks you how much of your own money would you bet on it happening. Here are some examples:

"If I don't get out of here, I'm going to faint"

Challenge "What are the chances of me fainting? I always think that I am going to faint yet I never have since I was pregnant. On the few times when I haven't been able to get out, I have felt very faint but then the feeling passed and I was OK. So just stay and brave it out. I'll be fine"

"My heart is pounding and my pulse is racing. My fingers are tingling. I'm going to have a heart attack"

Challenge "What are the chances of me having a heart attack? I've been through this many times before and I've never had a heart attack. My doctor has told me my heart is in fine shape. I saw all my symptoms in the handout. Even although they can come on when I feel calm, I now know that this is normal in stress"

**2). What is the worst thing...?
(‘putting the lid on it’)**

This challenge assumes that the things you worry about may well happen but are you making too much of them. So you learn to put the lid on the stress.

"What if I start to blush in front of the people at work? I would want to die"

Challenge "What is the worst thing that can happen? I've blushed in front of them a few times and I was very self-conscious. Nothing else happened. So if it happens again - will it be the end of the world? - will they disown me? - No. So, at worst, I would be embarrassed. I hate it but it isn't going to kill me. Don't make too much of it"

"What if I forget all the prices? I'll come across like an idiot" (salesman)

Challenge "What is the worst thing that can happen? The worst thing is that I'll forget the prices. Big deal - I'll look up my price book. I may not come across like the world's greatest salesman but I won't look like the worst. I've looked up the book hundreds of times in front of customers in the past. Keep things in proportion"

**3). Am I right to think that....?
(‘weighing the evidence’)**

This challenge assumes that you may be missing some important evidence. If you look for that evidence, your stress might lessen. Here are some examples (think what would happen if the person doesn't challenge these fears):

‘They are all looking at me. They can all see that I can't cope with this’

Challenge 'Am I right to think that they are all looking at me? Look around - they are just getting on with it. They are not bothered about me. I'm being too sensitive. I know I can hide my stress well. I think I look OK. In any case, I might be very tense just now but I am still coping'

'I'm a failure'

Challenge 'Am I right to think that I'm a failure. I know I shout at the wee ones a lot but depression makes me do this. I try my best and a lot of the time, I can be OK. I'm holding down my job - just but I'm still coping. I ask too much of myself - I can't be perfect. I'm far from it but I'm not the worst by a long shot'

4). The five year rule (‘the history game’)

This challenge assumes that the thing you are worrying about has happened or will happen. It then asks you to stand back from it and work out how bad it really is. You ask yourself '***will this matter in 5 years' time?***'.

'I really messed things up this morning. I made a real fool of myself. I'm not going back'

Challenge '**How big a deal will this morning be in five years time?** Get things in perspective here. It was awful this morning but it is over and I am still on my feet. I've learned something and it won't happen again. If that is the worst thing to happen to me for the next five years then I will be lucky. Stick in there'

'My life will never change. I will always feel like this'

Challenge 'Will I feel the same in five years time? How should I know? I can't read the future. I do feel in the pits just now but I've been here before and picked up. I can do the same again. But this time, I have the chance to learn better ways of coping. Life can change - don't give up'

5). What is this worth?

('is life too short?')

This challenge asks you, given all the other things in your life, whether you are spending too much time thinking about things that don't deserve it.

'I go to bed each night worrying about how I coped today. Did I say something silly to my neighbour?, Was I too hard on the kids? I always feel I have failed and I feel that I am stuck in a very deep rut'

Challenge **Is life too short to worry like this?** No-one at home says I'm failing. In fact, they often say how well I deal with the kids. My neighbours always talk to me so they must think I'm OK. On one level, things are going fine. Yet my life feels miserable. I should learn to pat myself on the back a bit more'

'I feel envy and hatred towards so many people. I hate myself but I don't make any moves to change. I am wasting my life

Challenge **Is life too short to think like this?** When I'm on my death bed, do I want to look back on all the chances I have not taken? all the people I've snubbed? all the fears that have held me back? I've only going to be on this earth once. I've got to confront life. I've got to give it my best shot. If things don't work out then at least I've tried.

Thought Trap Challenge

Write down your negative thoughts and identify any Thought Traps. Then use one of the five challenges from above to free yourself from the Trap

Negative Thought Traps	Trap Challenge

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

We have spent some time looking at how low mood and anxiety can bias thinking and lead people to experience more negative thoughts. However, anxiety and depression can also impact on our **style** of thinking. For instance, someone with depression is more likely to **dwell on or ruminate** about the **past**; whereas someone with anxiety is more likely to **worry** about the **future**. **Perfectionism** can also be an unhelpful style of thinking and can lead people to experience low mood, irritability and anxiety. Rumination, worry and perfectionism are summarised below.

Rumination

Rumination involves thinking repeatedly about past events, some people call it 'dwelling' on things or analysing things. People with low mood usually engage in this type of thinking in an attempt to make sense of their past and why bad things have happened to them. Some people with depression also tend to believe that dwelling on past events can help them to reach a better understanding of their problems and make them feel better.

However, dwelling on the past and focusing on why bad things have happened doesn't always help, as we often don't know why bad things happen and focusing on them doesn't help us to move forward. In fact there is a lot of research evidence to suggest that ruminating about the past actually maintains depression and is unhelpful. Over analysing things and dwelling on things is not going to make us feel better or happier. When you think about it you don't often meet many cheerful philosophers!

Rather than continually asking **why** i.e. '**Why don't I feel any better**', it is more helpful for people to ask themselves **what** i.e. '**What am I going to do to make myself feel better?**'.

Worrying

People tend to worry when they feel anxious about the future. People who suffer from anxiety tend to think that worrying is going to help them to **prepare**

for the worst. They also think that worrying may help them to solve their problems. In fact worrying doesn't help us to prepare for the future or help us to solve problems. Instead worrying can make us feel even more anxious about the future and less able to cope if in fact the worst did happen.

To help manage your worry it can be useful to set yourself some '**Worry Time**'. This involves setting a specific 10 minute slot when you will sit with a pen and paper and write down all your worries.

You then ask yourself : "*Is there anything I can do about this worry right now?*".

If the answer is yes, then go ahead problem-solve and come up with a plan of action. However if your answer is no, then ask yourself: "can I deal with later?", and if the answer is still no, then try to let your worry go and focus on something else such as another activity or relaxation.

It is important that if you find yourself worrying outwith your allocated worry time, that you defer your worry until then. For example if your worry time is 7pm and you worry at 10am, you say 'I will deal with this worry during my allotted worry time so will dismiss it just now and focus on what I was doing instead'. What people have found who have used this technique is that they often forget some of their worries, or realise that they are unnecessary and unrealistic.

Perfectionism

There are 3 ways in which we can be perfectionists, we can believe that:

1. we have **high expectations of ourselves** and become critical when we do not meet these expectations
2. we have **high standards for other people** and become critical of them when we feel that they do not meet them
3. **other people have high expectations of us** and can lead us to feel rejected, ashamed or angry if we think that we have not achieved what is expected of us.

Thinking this way can lead to low mood and anger. This is because we no longer get any enjoyment out of what we do because we are too busy worrying about the outcome. If our standards are not met we can become critical of ourselves and other people. When this criticism is directed at ourselves it leaves us feeling down. If our anger is targeted at other people this can lead us to feeling guilty and damage our relationships. Ultimately this can leave us with low self-esteem.

Challenging Perfectionism

It is common to think that if we do not hold high expectations of ourselves and others then we will not be successful in life. However, success is about being able to fail. After all if we are able to cope with failure then we are more likely to try again. Consequently, by accepting that failure is part of life we may be more likely to achieve our goals without damaging our relationships.

Quick Questions to help challenge unhelpful thinking

It takes time to learn thought challenging. It can be useful then to have some handy and quick questions that you can ask yourself when ever your thinking is negative. It can be good idea to write these down on a pocket sized piece of paper/card or keep them on your mobile so that you can read them if needed.

1). Is it helpful to think in this way?

- If not, Why not?

2). What are the consequences of continuing to think in this way?

-feel worse, better?

3). What would you say to a friend who was being so critical of him/herself?

- Would you agree with them?

- If not, why not?

Cost-benefit Analysis

Another way of challenging our thinking is called Cost-Benefit Analysis. This really means looking at both the advantages and disadvantages of continuing to hold a particular thought or belief. Firstly you need to select a thought or belief which you wish to work on. Then try to think of the advantages of holding that thought. Put them in the benefits column in the table below. Following this, list the costs that holding the thought has on your life. Make an effort to list more costs (disadvantages) than benefits (advantages).

Thought: “I should always strive to get others approval”

Benefits of Thought	Cost of Thought
It means I try hard to get people’s approval and not let this slip.	It’s exhausting and means I’m always striving.
If I stop trying people might not like me as much.	Trying hard all the time actually makes me feel worse!
	It puts me off meeting people.
	Lowers my mood.
	Makes me feel more anxious around people

This is a useful exercise to show that what you may believe is a useful way for you to think actually costs more than you realise. Hopefully this will help you be motivated to change your thinking. This exercise can also be used to examine the costs/benefits of a behaviour too.



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Reviewed 2013