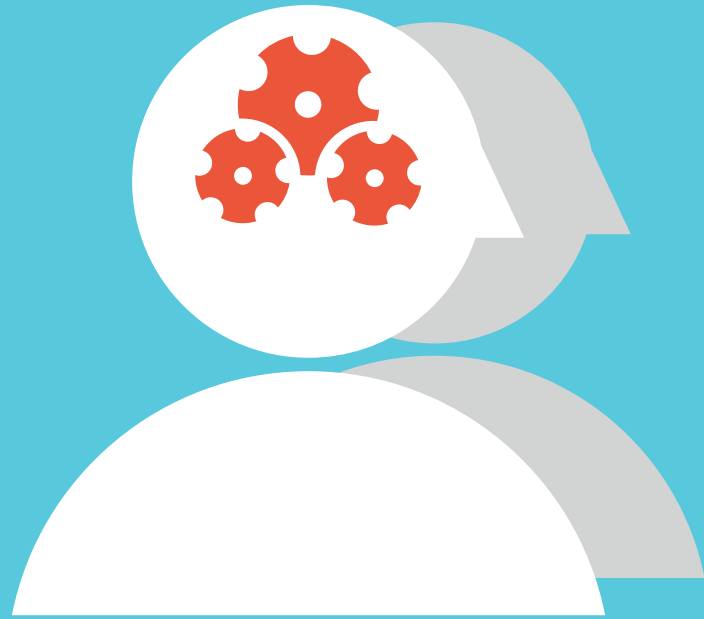




Ollscoil Chathair
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

Tracking Unhelpful Thinking

Mental Health



†SEIRBHÍS TACAÍOCHTA AGUS FORBARTHA
STUDENT SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT



Tracking Unhelpful Thinking

Thought Tracker Approaches

We spend a great deal of time listening to our thoughts. Some of these thoughts are negative and are about ourselves, what we do and what we expect to happen in the future.

We often accept many of these thoughts as true without really questioning them, particularly the negative ones. We then can become trapped.

- The negative thoughts become louder
- It becomes harder to turn down the volume and hear other thoughts
- The more we listen, the more unpleasant feelings we experience and the less we end up doing.

For some people, negative thoughts and thinking errors occur so often that there just doesn't seem to be enough time in the day to check and challenge each one. Because they may occur often, we need to find ways to stop them as soon as we notice them.

The thought tracker has some ideas to help you to regain control of your thoughts. You may not always find them easy to use, and there will probably be times when you may be aware of your thoughts but feel unable to turn them off. Try not to worry about this. If these ideas work for some of the time they are useful, but remember that the more you practice the better you will become.

1. DISTRACTION

You may notice that in some situations you often feel uncomfortable or have regular negative thoughts. At these times you may want some short-term relief, and this is where distraction techniques may be helpful.

- Distraction helps to take your mind off your negative thoughts
- Distraction helps you to take control of your thoughts by thinking about something else
- Remember that if you continue to listen to your negative thoughts they will become louder and take over

The idea of distraction is to train yourself to keep your mind busy doing what you want it to do. You teach yourself to focus your thoughts on something else. Rather than listening to worrying or negative thoughts, you learn to bring your attention to do what you want it to do.

Distraction can be achieved in different ways.

a) Absorbing activities

Some people find that they can switch off and become totally absorbed in certain activities. Games, reading, watching television / video, playing an instrument, listening to music, swimming, horse riding, play and team sport may be helpful.

The more you concentrate on what you are doing, the more your negative thoughts move off the centre stage of your attention.

At those times when you become aware that you are listening to your negative thoughts, try one of the activities which you find helpful. For example:

- Instead of lying in bed listening to your negative thoughts, listen to some music.
- Instead of worrying whether your friend will call, pick up a book and start to read it or engage in an activity you enjoy / need to do (eg cook your favourite dish, clean your room!)

b) Describe what you see

This involves describing to yourself in detail what you see on your immediate environment. Notice what is going on around you rather than concentrating on how you feel and / or on unhelpful thinking.

To do this, look around you and deliberately place your attention on what you see.

Notice the colours, shapes, size, smells, textures etc of the things, objects, people in your environment. Take your time while doing this.

Name and describe in detail to yourself what you are seeing.

The idea is to draw your attention away from your worrying thoughts and regain some control.

c) Thinking games / puzzles / mindfulness colouring

At other times you may want to occupy your thoughts by setting yourself some form of thinking puzzle, game or mindfulness colouring

The puzzle / game / mindfulness colouring has to be hard enough to challenge you.

The idea is that this task absorbs your attention while drawing it away from any unhelpful negative thoughts you might be having.

2. Coping Self-Talk

Negative thoughts often increase anxious and unhappy feelings. Instead of listening, try changing track by using coping self-talk. Coping self-talk is useful because:

- It can help you to feel more relaxed
- It can make you feel more encouraged
- It encourages you to try rather than giving up or avoiding doing things.

Instead of listening to your doubts and worries plan to keep repeating encouraging and coping messages to yourself.

Example: "Let's do this step by step"

"I'm going to do this. It will be ok"

"Just do it for 20 minutes"

"Well done, you have made a start"

Now think of a situation or event that make you feel anxious or unpleasant, Write down or draw a picture of the thoughts that race through your mind when you are in this type of situation.


Once you have completed this write down a coping self-talk statement(s). Hold you focus on your coping self-talk as best you can. This loving kindness approach towards ourselves can take time but stay with it as practice will enable it to develop.

3. Thought Stopping

A) The stop sign

Sometimes you will find that you are only able to stop your thoughts for a very short time, if at all, and you may find yourself getting upset. Another method you could use to help this is "Thought Stopping" as soon as you become aware of the thought, follow the steps below:

- a. Bring up an image of a "stop sign" in your mind
- b. Visualise the sign in detail. Notice the size, shape, colour, and font size of the word stop. Take a minute to visualise this now take your time and notice all the detail of your stop sign.
- c. Immediately and firmly say to yourself "stop".
- d. Repeat firmly saying to yourself "stop"
- e. Keep your attention on your mental image of your stop sign

- 
- f. If possible say the word “stop” out loud
 - g. Make the image of your stop sign bigger and brighter
 - h. Repeat steps d to f

Some people find it useful to emphasize this by holding onto the arms of chair or seat if sitting or holding onto something solid if standing.

Alternative: make a fist of both your hands and squeeze them tightly while saying the word “stop” a few times firmly to yourself or out loud (if possible).

Example:

Peter goes for an interview. All the time Peter was waiting to be called in for his interview negative thoughts were racing through his head.

“You’re not going to get that job”. “I bet I’ll go red and dry up when they ask me questions”, “I look silly in this suit”.

Peter had enough. He was getting more and more anxious. He decided to use thought stopping. He said clearly and loudly to himself “stop”.

As soon as he said this he also started to use his coping self-talk: “This may not be easy but I want this job and I’m going to try. It doesn’t matter if I do go red. I’ll answer their questions as best I can”. Peter repeated this to himself a few times.


With thought stopping you are changing the tape inside your head. Instead of listening to the constant negative tape, thought stopping helps you to turn away from them and make space for something more helpful

B) Turning the volume down

Sometimes you may hear the same worries or negative thoughts over and over again. It is like listening to a DVD that is being played inside your head.

At these times it may be helpful to try the following approach:

- Imagine a picture of a DVD player going round and round inside your head.
- Really look at this DVD player and get a good picture of it



Notice all its details

- The more you concentrate on it, the clearer your picture will become.

Notice: Its size and colour

- Where its controls are
- How to alter the volume
- How to turn it on and off

Once you have a good picture in your head imagine yourself changing the settings. Take your time while visualizing each of the following:

- Turn the volume up and notice how the sound becomes louder
- Turn the volume down and notice how the sound becomes quieter
- Turn the off switch and notice silence
- Turn it on and notice how you start to hear the sound again

Continue to practise changing the controls. When you start to notice that you are listening to your negative thoughts, imagine the picture of your DVD player and turn the volume down or see yourself turning the tape off altogether.

C) The “Worry Safe Box”

Sometimes it is difficult to stop worrying and to turn off the thoughts that continually play inside our heads.

When this happens, it may be useful to:

- Write down your thoughts on paper. Take your time with this and write them all down
- Once you have finished place them in a designated box which you can make your “worry safe”. Lock them or secure them away in this worry safe / box.
- At the end of the week, unlock / uncover your worry box and talk about your worries
- with someone you can trust and who will really listen.
- Alternatively you can tear up the paper and throw the thoughts into the recycling bin.

Concluding Note:

There are different ways of establishing the ability to observe your unhelpful thinking patterns and different ways of responding relating to them.

Therefore it is recommended that you try out a range of different approaches and adopt the ones that work best for you.



Adapted from the Think Good – Feel Good Workbook

Please remember, The DCU Counselling and Personal Development Service is here to help. Should any questions arise from the above topic or if you would like more information, please feel free to contact us.

Also, if you wish to inquire about making an appointment with the DCU Counselling and Personal Development Service, please do not hesitate to connect with us, we would be more than happy to be of further support to you.

The DCU Counselling and Personal Development Service,

For the Glasnevin Campus
Email: counselling@dcu.ie
Telephone: 01 700 5165

For the St Patrick's Campus
Email: spd.counselling@dcu.ie
Telephone: 01 700 9215

Click [here](#) for our service website which will provide you with further information:

National Text Service Number

50808: a free 24/7 text service. [Click here](#) for further information



tSeirbhís Tacaíochta agus Forbartha
Student Support and Development

[dcu.ie/students](https://www.dcu.ie/students)