

Working With Unhelpful Thinking

An important source of our feelings is the way we think about ourselves and the world. It is possible to identify your unhelpful negative thoughts and beliefs and substitute them with more reasonable, self enhancing thoughts. Negative thoughts tend to come into the mind automatically and seem completely valid. It can help to write them down in order to develop a more objective perspective. "Negative thoughts are nearly always unrealistic as they contain what are called cognitive distortions". (Beck A.,)

Use a Daily Record to work with Cognitive Distortions and Dysfunctional Beliefs (see form provided on page 4) to facilitate you to work through the following steps:

- a. The first thing to do is to write a brief description of a specific problem that is upsetting and bothering you. It is important not to be vague. **(Event)**.
- b. Write down your negative feelings using words like sad, angry, and anxious. Rate each one on a scale from 0 (the least) to 100 (the most). **(Feeling)**
- c. Ask yourself, "what are the negative thoughts that are passing through my mind in relation to the upsetting situation?" After you have written down your negative thoughts, estimate how much you believe each of them warrants on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 100 (completely). **(Negative Thought)**
- d. Using the checklist of cognitive distortions and dysfunctional beliefs (on page 2 & 3). Identify the distortion(s) and dysfunctional belief(s) in the negative thoughts e.g. mind reading, filtering. **(Distortions and Dysfunctional Beliefs)**.
- e. After you identify the distortions and beliefs in your negative thoughts, substitute rational responses. Indicate how strongly you believe each one warrants on a scale of 0-100. **(Rational Response)**
- f. After you've recorded all your negative thoughts, re-rate your belief in each of them in the light of your rational response. Replace your original score with a new estimate.
- g. Finally, evaluate how you feel. Rate your feelings on a scale from 0-100. **(Outcome Feeling)**

Keep your daily thought record for a month, working on these unhelpful patterns for ten to fifteen minutes per day .Remember it takes 21 days of practice to form a new habit.

Checklist and definitions of Cognitive Distortions

- **Filtering:** You dwell on the negative details and magnify them while ignoring the positive aspects of a situation. For example when you sit down trying to study your mind keeps thinking of all the time you have been wasting, often forgetting the times you have studied. You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on this intensely. It operates like a drop of ink that colours the entire beaker of water.
- **All-or-Nothing thinking:** This refers to your tendency to evaluate your personal quantities in extreme black or white categories. For example; “performance falls short of perfect, I am failing”
- **Over-generalisation:** Expecting everything to go wrong because one thing has gone wrong. You come to a general conclusion based on a single negative event. If something bad happens once, you view it as a never-ending pattern of defeat. For example: “I’ll have nothing to say, I’m always like that”.
- **Mindreading:** You assume you can tell what other people are thinking. You know what people are feeling (especially towards you), and assume why they act the way they do, even though there’s no definite evidence for this. For example: “I know what they think of me. Everybody thinks I’m boring/dull. Your friend doesn’t catch your eye at lunchtime in the queue despite you looking over at her so you think to yourself “she must be upset with me and that is why she doesn’t look at me”.
- **Catastrophizing:** You expect disaster and tend to dwell on “what ifs”. For example: “What if I study the wrong things? What if I will not pass the exam”? In addition you magnify your imperfections and minimize your good points.
- **Blaming:** You hold other people responsible for your pain or you blame yourself for every problem or you assume that you are to blame for negative things that happen. For example: “It’s all my fault that we broke up!” “We broke up because I am not loveable”.
- **Shoulds:** You criticise yourself or other people based on a list of “shoulds, musts and oughts”. You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn’ts, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. For example: “I never do enough studying. I should be doing more. I must be more sociable. I should be better than him”. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements towards others, you feel anger, frustration and resentment.
- **Jumping to Conclusions:** Making up your mind when you don’t know all the information. For example: My boyfriend didn’t call me when he said he would so you think “he’s forgotten about me, I’m just not so important to him”. You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.
- **Labelling and Mislabelling:** Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself. For example: “I’m stupid”. When someone else’s behaviour rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him/her “e.g.”He is boring”.
- **Personalisation:** You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event which in fact you are not primarily responsible for. For example: a friend says that he’s angry and you immediately assume that he means he’s angry with you.

- **Being Right:** You are continually on trial to prove that your actions and opinions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and you will go to any length to demonstrate your rightness. For example: “How dare you question my opinion; I’m the teacher”.
- **Emotional Reasoning:** You assume that your negative emotions reflects the way things are. For example: “I feel shy, so I must be inadequate!”

Checklist and Definitions of Dysfunctional Beliefs

Another type of negative thinking has to do with our beliefs, the basic assumptions we make about our reality. Beliefs can predispose us to think about ourselves, others and the world in particular ways. Dysfunctional beliefs underlie the distortions described above but can be more difficult to identify. For example, a belief in approval (described below) will lead to one immediately doubt their own judgement whenever somebody disagrees with them. A belief in perfectionism may stop somebody from participating in activities because “If I can’t do it right the first time, I don’t do it at all.”

- **Approval:** Your happiness is in the hands of other people. You must be loved and approved by all the significant people in your life or you are not worthwhile.
- **Avoidance:** You believe it is best to avoid anything that is unknown, uncertain or potentially dangerous. If someone is challenging, different or risky you cannot help but be scared or anxious.
- **Expectations:** If you do well, you should be rewarded. Similarly, people should meet your expectations and you must always live up to everyone’s expectations.
- **Determinism:** You believe that the past determines the present. Everybody is the way s/he is and they cannot change.
- **Perfectionism:** You must always try to be unfailing, competent and perfect in all you undertake. If you can’t win, you don’t play.
- **Fairness:** You feel resentful and angry because you think you know what’s just but other people won’t agree with you.
- **External control:** External events cause your feelings and behaviours. You see yourself as a helpless victim of fate.

A Daily Record to Work with Cognitive Distortions and Dysfunctional Beliefs

Event (a)	Feeling (b)	Negative Thought (c)	Identify Distortion / Dysfunctional Belief (d)	Rational / Balanced Response(e)	Outcome Feeling (g)
(An actual event, leading to unpleasant feeling)	(Specify feeling: sad, angry, anxious etc)	Write automatic thought(s).	(e.g. mind reading, filtering etc)	(Write rational response, removing distortion/dysfunctional belief)	(Write how you now feeling using a more rational balanced thinking pattern)



--	--	--	--	--	--

The Counselling and Personal Development Service, Dublin City University.
E-mail: counselling@dcu.ie

Phone: 01 - 7005165

Website: www.dcu.ie/students/counselling