Challenging negative automatic thoughts: Cognitive Restructuring

We refer to the process of recognizing our thought habits, challenging them and replacing them with more helpful styles of thinking, as “***cognitive restructuring***”.

Through this we aim to:

* Become more aware of negative thinking patterns
* Learn to recognize our anxiety-producing appraisals
* Begin to notice that these anxiety producing thoughts have become automatic
* Recognize that these thoughts are often negative or distorted
* Begin to challenge and change those thought habits so you start using more balanced appraisals

We can view our thoughts as being either:

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| **IRRATIONAL** | **BALANCED** | **IRRATIONAL** |
| Overly negative | Balanced perception of reality | Overly positive |
| Pessimistic  Negative  Self-defeating | Reasonable  Realistic | Denies concern  Has distorted thoughts  Avoidant, falsely optimistic |

Overly negative irrational self-talk

Inaccurate, negative or distorted thoughts tend to be catastrophic, absolutist, illogical, self-defeating and unrealistic. They increase our concerns and often involve an inaccurate perception of reality. The thoughts tend to make us feel defeated and afraid. Because these types of thoughts are irrational we refer to them as cognitive distortions.

**Common unhelpful thinking styles include:**

1. **Mind reading**: assuming that we know what people think without having sufficient evidence, for example “The boss has called me in to the office. It must mean that she’s unhappy with my work performance”.
2. **Fortune-telling**: you predict the future, usually that things will get worse or be dangerous - “I’ll fail that exam”, “I’ll have a terrible time if I go to that party”.
3. **Catastrophising**: believing that what has or will happen will be so awful and unbearable that you won’t be able to stand it - “if I don’t get really good marks in the exam I won’t be able to get into the course that I want to, and if I don’t do that, I won’t be able to have the career I have planned, and there is nothing else I’d like do, so my chances of a happy life will be gone”.
4. **Labelling**: assigning global negative traits to yourself and to others – “I’m not a sociable person”, “customers in the shop where I work are greedy, dishonest and nuisances”.
5. **Discounting positives**: you dismiss the positive accomplishments of yourself or others as trivial – “I only got a B+, I should have achieved an A”, “I appreciate you did this task for me, but what about the parts that could have been done better?”
6. **Negative filter**: you focus almost exclusively on the negatives and seldom notice the positives – “Look at all the crime in the newspapers, the streets are unsafe and young people just can’t be trusted”.
7. **Overgeneralising**: you perceive a global pattern of negatives on the basis of a single incident – “My medical condition caused me embarrassment when I went out recently, I just can’t go out any more, this sort of thing is always going to happen”.
8. **Dichotomous thinking**: you view events or people in all-or-nothing terms – “That training workshop was a waste of time”, “My friend let me down when I asked him to help the other day, so much for that friendship”.
9. **“Shoulds”**: you interpret events in terms of how things should be rather than simply focusing on what is – “People should do what they say they’re going to”, “People should be considerate of my medical condition”.
10. **Personalising**: you take on all the blame for negative events to yourself and fail to see that other people or circumstances have also played a part – “I feel so pushy when I ask for a special diet on a plane or in a hotel or restaurant, I know I’m being such a nuisance, I prefer to just not go”, “My relationship ended because I wasn’t able to be a good partner”.
11. **Blaming**: you focus on the other person as the source of your negative feelings and you refuse to take responsibility for changing yourself – “I can’t help my temper, I had a terrible time at home as a child”, “My bosses at work are always on my back, they’ve got it in for me”.
12. **Unfair comparisons**: you interpret events in terms of standards that are unrealistic by focusing primarily on others who do better than you and then judging yourself inferior by comparison – “look how much fun some of my work colleagues are being at the Christmas party, I’m so boring, such a stick in the mud”, “Look at what some of my school friends have achieved, and here am I in a routine job, I’m such a failure, I’ll never get anywhere”.
13. **Regret orientation**: you focus on the idea that you could have done better in the past rather than on what you could do better now – “How my life would have been better if I had just worked harder for that exam”, “If only I’d had some better financial advice in my early life, I’d be in a much better position now”, “If only I hadn’t said that to my friend”.
14. **What If?**: you ask a series of questions about “what if” something happens, and you’re never satisfied with any of the answers – “What if I get anxious? ”, “what if one day I need to have surgery?”, “what if I need to get to a toilet?”.
15. **Emotional reasoning**: you let your feelings guide your interpretation of reality – “I’m feeling unhappy about myself, how can other people respect my work”, “I’m feeling annoyed, my friend’s failure to return my phone call means they don’t want to know me”.
16. **Inability to disconfirm**: you reject any evidence or arguments that might contradict your negative thoughts. For example, when you have the thought “I am unlovable,” you reject as irrelevant any evidence that people like you. Consequently, your thought cannot be refuted. Other examples “that’s not the real issue”, “that project worked okay, but it was a fluke”, “I got away with it this time, but next time I’ll get shown up”.
17. **Judgement focus**: you view yourself, and others, and events in terms of black and white evaluations (good-bad or superior-inferior) rather than simply describing, accepting, or understanding. You are focused on the judgements of others as well as your own judgements of yourself. “If I’m not achieving well at work then I’m a loser”, “that friend fell short and was embarrassed publicly, I do not want to be associated with a loser so I’d better keep my distance”.

Exercise: as you become aware of unhelpful automatic thoughts underlying your behaviours, perhaps over the next few days, write the thoughts in the first column of the form below, and note which of the categories of distortions that thought represents.

**Categories of thought distortions**: mind reading, fortune-telling, catastrophising, labelling, discounting positives, negative filter, over generalising, dichotomous thinking, “shoulds” personalising, blaming, unfair comparisons, regret orientation, what-if thinking, emotional reasoning, inability to disconfirm, judgement focus

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| **Automatic Thoughts** | **Distortion** |
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Overly positive irrational self-talk

Overly positive irrational thoughts are used to deny concerns or convince ourselves that everything is okay. This type of self talk involves an inaccurate perception of reality, it is a “Pollyanna” or overly optimistic perspective.

Believing that everything will be all right when doing an activity can substitute for careful appreciation of the situation and planning for anticipated problems. This can then lead to stressful experiences, such as having to seek a toilet in a hurry, which reduces our motivation for doing such activities in the future. Anticipating problems and pre-planning our options is likely to lead to a more relaxed outcome.

Please also read the handout on realistic thinking as part of this session.

Rational (balanced) self-talk

Rational thoughts are reasonable, self-enhancing, accurate and realistic. A balanced inner dialogue is characterised by an appropriate level of concern and balanced perception of reality.

Overly negative and overly positive irrational thoughts are extreme or polarised ways of thinking.

We strive to develop a rational, balanced style of thinking.

But it seems so artificial ...

Remember, we are trying to recognise and change habits, and by definition habits are something we are very familiar with, very comfortable with, and something that seems natural.

Imagine an aspiring business executive who seeks advice on his or her personal presentation in order to maximise their effectiveness in committees, board meetings and addresses. The adviser might observe their clients in these situations, might videotape these situations, live or in role plays, and might demonstrate to the client physical and vocal habits that reduce the power of their presentation. It might be that the person slouches in their chair, they might habitually have an expression on their face that does not represent what they’re thinking or feeling, they might tend to hold their hand over their mouth and speak through their fingers, and there may be a number of vocal habits that they need to retrain in order to come across as more interested or more authoritative.

Notice how uncomfortable they may feel when these habits are pointed out to them, and how uncomfortable they may feel in continually trying to notice and modify them. Notice how “artificial” the new postures and presentation styles will initially feel. Think how many times their attention will need to be drawn to these habits as the old ways reassert themselves, and how much repetition they will need to put into the new behavioural styles before they begin to feel more natural and eventually begin to just feel like “me”. I suppose it’s like getting used to a new jacket or wearing a new pair of shoes. And this is for clearly observable behaviours that can be pointed out by others, noticed by ourselves, or videotaped.

How much more difficult will it be for thought habits? Others can only notice the behavioural consequences of these thought habits and ask about or guess the underlying causal sequence. Much of the onus is on us to understand the process we’ve been discussing, to be sensitive to the patterns of our moods and to become familiar with our habitual styles of thinking.

But we already believe that our current thinking is “right”. For me, the key question is not “is my current thinking right?”; it is much more important to ask ourselves the question “is my current thinking helpful?”

I think it takes us much further down the track when we can say: ”yes, the way I’m thinking seems right, seems comfortable, but it does not lead me where I want to go, it doesn’t help with my behavioural or emotional or relationship goals. So let’s put on this new coat, this new way of thinking, and this will lead to new behaviours. The success of these new behaviours then provides feedback into my habitual thinking and my concept of myself, and this helps my new ways of thinking seem more normal, more “me”.

Situation: I am asked to give a speech at my friend’s wedding

Automatic thoughts: I’m no good at public speaking, I’ll mess this up and be really embarrassed, people will laugh at me and won’t want to know me, this is awful, why did they ask me in the first place, they know I don’t like this sort of thing, it’s so selfish of them, I won’t enjoy their wedding at all, I just don’t want to go, how can I get out of this?

Emotion: stressed, anxious, fearful, annoyed

Behaviour: avoidance, procrastination, perhaps turning down the offer to give the talk (which may have consequences for the friendship, at the very least, the loss of an opportunity to enhance the friendship), failure to prepare, giving a poorly prepared talk, looking stressed during the presentation.

This performance then feeds back to the situation by increasing feelings of failure and inadequacy, and reinforcing the importance of avoiding the risk of such situations in the future.

OR:

Situation: I am asked to give a speech at my friend’s wedding

Automatic thoughts: What an honour to be asked to be part of this important day for my friend. I’m not an experienced speaker and I feel nervous about it. I’d better prepare carefully and in plenty of time so I can practice it properly. Perhaps I can get the advice of other friends and we can put together something better than I would do on my own, and I can practice it in front of them. I can have a look at the reception centre so I can feel a bit more comfortable with the surroundings. This is stressful, but it is also a good thing to be doing. It will leave me with good memories and will be a chance for me to give something special to my friends. Yes, it is stressful, but it can also be fun. It will be a good chance for me to develop a part of my skill that I haven’t developed much before. If I plan and practice I can do this. It doesn’t need to be the best presentation in the world, people are enjoying themselves and will be a kind audience. Even if I do get a bit sweaty and mess my lines up, people will not really notice, and will not think anything of it. I am going to enjoy this.

Emotion: gratitude, positive stress, enthusiasm, energy, happiness, desire to engage with the task, desire to engage with others

Behaviour: engagement with task, active problem-solving, planning, preparation, practice, seeking out the help of others, positive attitude during the presentation, adequate performance, coping positively with nervousness and mistakes

This performance then feeds back to the situation by enhancing the friendship, and by increasing our profile with the other friends who attended the wedding, resulting in increased engagement with our friendship group. Increased public speaking confidence, knowing that we can do an adequate job with preparation, and that we can survive our nervousness and mistakes during the presentation.

Notice how the person would have firmly believed the thoughts in the first example were “right”. However, were they “helpful” in achieving the person’s goals and enhancing their quality of life?

Notice how the alternative automatic thoughts in the second example were not “Pollyanna” type thoughts, that it will just be fine. They acknowledged the stress in the situation, although they interpreted this as not necessarily something to be avoided, and they recognized the need to undertake a number of activities to achieve the objective. These thoughts were much more rational and balanced, and they were HELPFUL.

**Now move on to the section “Challenging Negative Automatic Thoughts”**