



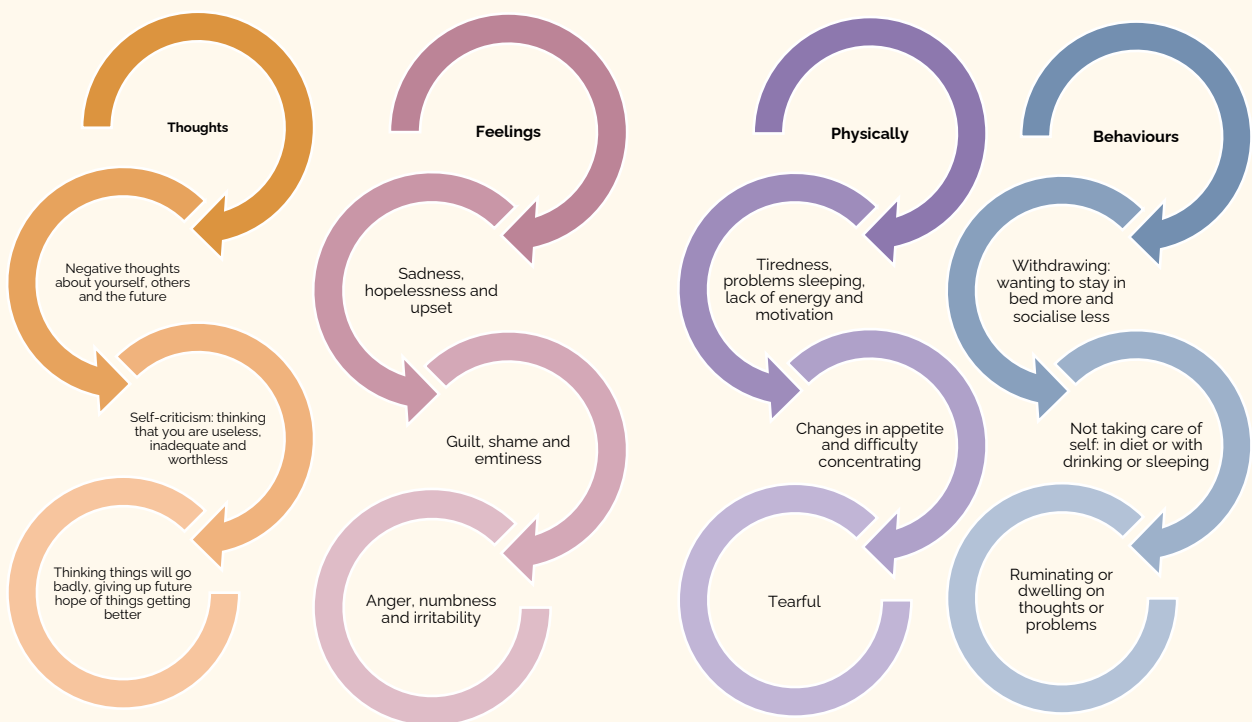
A Booklet for Negative Thoughts

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Feeling Self-critical and Negative

Our thinking patterns are constantly changing. It's estimated we have 40,000-50,000 thoughts a day. It's the ones we pay attention to that can really impact our mood. If you are going through a period of stress or are feeling low or anxious you may notice you focus on more negative thoughts. These thoughts may become quite harsh or self-critical. Our thoughts can have a big impact on the way we feel. By challenging negative thoughts we can try to develop more helpful and realistic thoughts and improve our mood. To start with let's have a look at what areas of your mood, physical symptoms and behaviours can be influenced by your thoughts. Do you recognise any of the following?



How would you describe how you're feeling at the moment?

Goals

When we're feeling low something that can be difficult but helpful to start off with is thinking about what you would like to be doing if you didn't feel this way. Having goals in mind can help increase your motivation and sense of achievement. They can give you a direction to look towards. Try to think about where you want to be in the future. Sometimes thinking of things you used to do that you'd like to do again can help.

Breaking goal setting down is proven to help create goals that people are more likely to stick to. It can also make thinking about goals feel less overwhelming. We call this method of goal setting SMART goals.

Tip: small goals are more achievable to start with

Specific: Try to be as specific as possible including dates, times and what exactly you want to achieve

e.g. 'I want to exercise more' -> 'I want to jog twice a week'

Measurable: Making a goal measurable means you can track your progress

e.g. 'twice a week' is a way to measure progress

Achievable: Is this a realistic goal in the short term? Is it possible to achieve in the next month? If not, think about breaking it down

e.g. 'I want to run a marathon' -> 'I want to jog non-stop for 30 minutes'

Relevant: Make sure the goal you have chosen is in line with what you want to address. Will achieving the goal make a difference to you now?

e.g. 'is jogging something that makes me feel good? Or do I prefer yoga?'

Time Specific: Try to set a time frame of when you want to achieve this goal by

e.g. 'in a month's time I want to be jogging twice a week'

Write down your goals here using the above tips:

1.

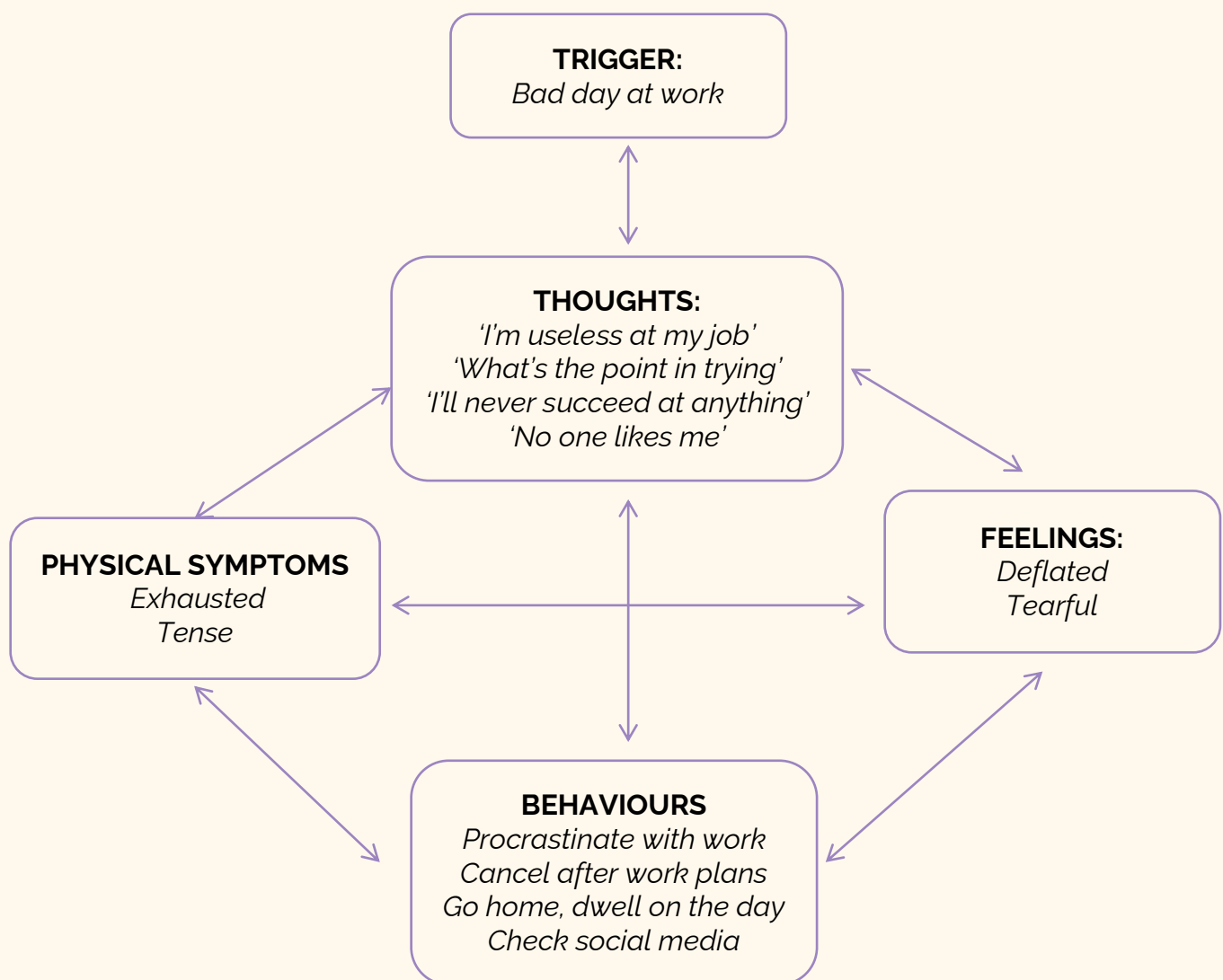
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The Cycle of Unhelpful Thinking

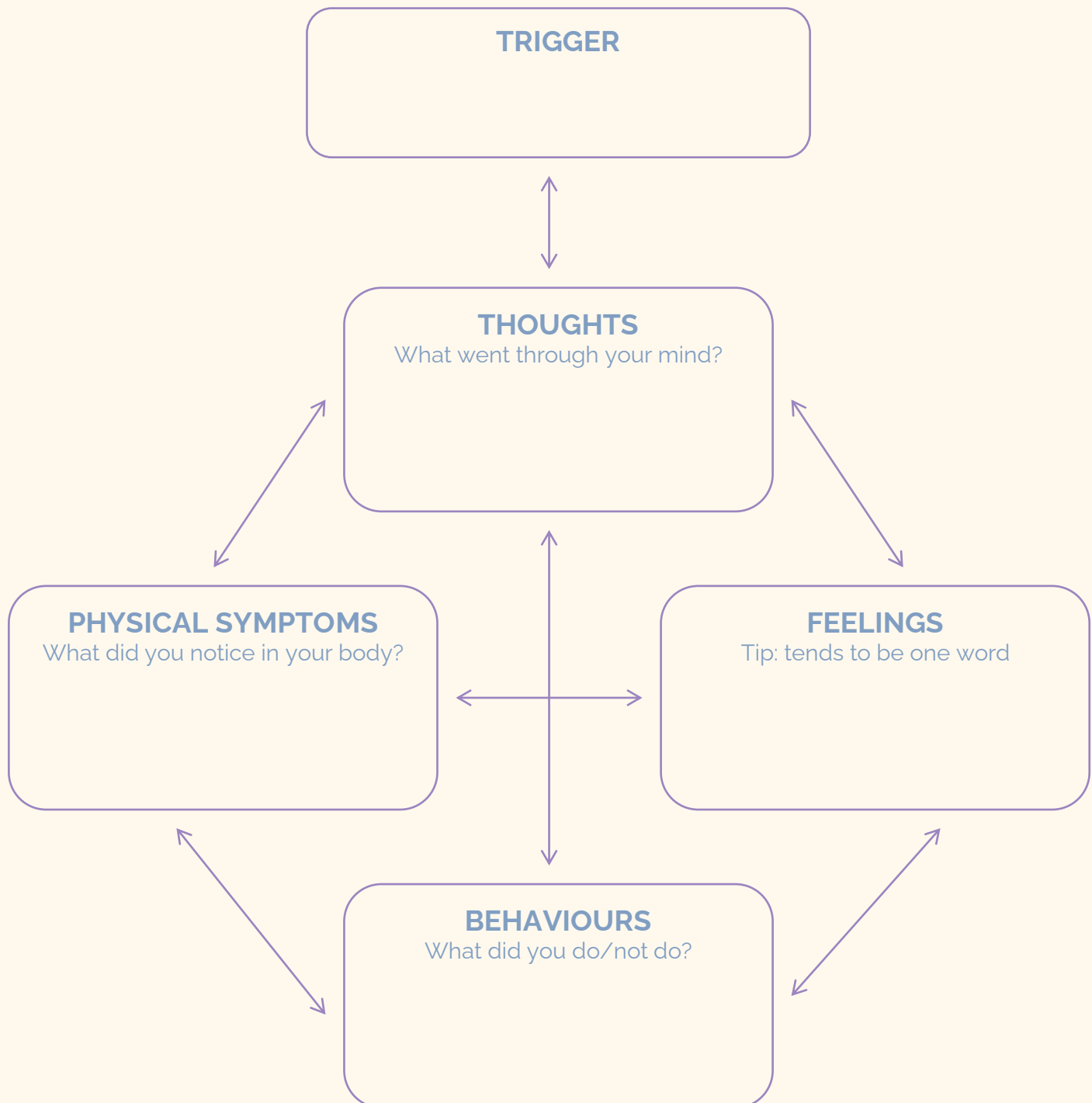
When we have a negative or unhelpful thought about a situation, ourselves or other people it can really impact how we feel. We can become very focused on that negative perception and this can skew how we view the situation as a whole. This is called a negative bias. It stops us from taking in other perspectives and maintains the way we are feeling. Unfortunately this becomes a vicious cycle as when we are feeling worse we tend to pick up on the negatives more. The thoughts might start to feel like facts. It becomes difficult to shift our attention away from the negatives, we might start to withdraw socially or use drinking or keeping ourselves really busy to try and distract from the thoughts.

This is known as a 'vicious cycle'



Your turn

Try to think of a time your thoughts became quite negative recently and map it out below. Starting with the trigger: what was the situation? Then go from there with the first thing you noticed: a shift in your feelings or a negative thought?



Identifying Thoughts

The first step in trying to shift these thoughts is to identify unhelpful thoughts which are causing distress and write them down. We don't tend to spend much time doing this so it can take practice. Initially it may be difficult and overwhelming writing down negative thoughts but capturing them in the moment is really important in order to start identifying patterns and analysing them.

If you have been thinking negatively or being self-critical for a while you may not even notice you're doing it (the thoughts may feel almost subconscious) so try to notice shifts in your emotions, when you notice a negative shift take a second to write down what thoughts are going through your mind.

The **STOP Technique** can help you notice your thoughts.

Stop

Stop what you are doing and take a moment.

Take a breath

Pay attention to your breathing.

Overview

Ask yourself some questions to get an overview of what is happening.

What changes have I noticed in my emotions?

What's triggering me right now?

Perspective

Record the thoughts that are going through your mind

What am I telling myself right now?

What is making me feel this way?

What bad things am I predicting will happen?

Practise using this and recording your thoughts across the week on the next page.

- When you are writing your thoughts down be as specific as possible so instead of "I'm useless" write down exactly made you feel useless i.e. "I'm struggling with a task at work I'm so useless compared to my colleagues".
- Sometimes our thoughts can come as questions, it's important when writing them down you answer these questions. For example: "What if I miss my work deadline" -> "I'm going to miss the deadline and get fired". It's the negative critical outcome that is causing the distress.
- Record the thought in the moment, it's more accurate this way.
- Record the thought not the emotion e.g. "I feel worn out" (feeling) -> "I can't cope" (thought)

My Thought Diary

[illegible]

Why am I paying attention to these thoughts?

Now you have a list of your thoughts let's think about why these thoughts are standing out for you. As we said above we have around 40,000-50,000 thoughts a day. We can't think about them all in detail, so our brain tends to pay attention to ones that fall into one of the following categories.

Is the thought **meaningful**?

Many of our daily thoughts are just not important to us. Our brain looks for important topics (e.g. work, family) and any thoughts which seem meaningless get thrown out – like when spam emails go straight to Junk.

Do you **believe** the thought?

Rightly or wrongly, there are lots of thoughts that we believe to be facts. When our brain comes across these, it draws our attention right to them – like the headlines on a newspaper. Thoughts we don't believe end up in the back pages.

When we fall into a pattern of negative thinking we often think these self-critical thoughts are more meaningful than they are – something we must pay attention to. Our belief in these thoughts also increases, we start to really believe we are the nasty things we tell ourselves.

Unfortunately we can't just switch off our thoughts, thinking is automatic. Have you ever tried telling yourself just 'not to think about something'? You probably find you just think about it more.

Instead we need to analyse these thoughts to see whether we should believe them as much as we do. We need to break the cycle of falsely believing the things we tell ourselves. There is a technique we use to come up with a more balanced thought, using this ensures the balanced thought has credibility and therefore you are more likely to work towards shifting your thinking and believing it.

Hot Thoughts

Can you notice any 'hot thoughts' in your diary? These are thought or themes that are coming up a lot in your week. They tend to hold a lot of emotion. You may believe them quite strongly. It's helpful to have a step back from these thoughts when you aren't as triggered by them and think of where there any past experiences or beliefs that could mean these ones are coming up more?

What did I notice in my thought diary?

What were my hot thoughts?

Why are these thoughts standing out more than others?

Did something in my past lead me to feeling this way? Where are they coming from?

Why are they bothering me more currently? (current stressors or comparisons?)

What is the impact on my mood thinking this way? Am I feeling better or worse?

Thinking Bias

Every day our brain processes a huge amount of information – think of all the things you see, hear and experience every day, it's a lot! So, our brain tries to make shortcuts, or jump to conclusions, to try and conserve energy. These shortcuts can be described as natural biases in our thinking. If our brain holds a belief, it will naturally notice the things that reinforce that belief and ignore the things that go against that belief.

For example, let's use the belief: 'All dogs bite':

- **Ignore evidence of the contrary:** We simply don't see, or our brain ignores the evidence that our thought might not be true. E.g. passing many dogs that seem calm and don't bite but not noticing or paying attention to them.
- **Makes exception:** When we do see evidence that our thought isn't true we tell ourselves it must be the exception to the rule. E.g. seeing a friendly dog in a park, playing with children and harmless but thinking "that's rare, that dog's very nice, most dogs aren't like that"
- **Reframes evidence:** When we see evidence that our thought isn't true and we 'reframe', or change the meaning of the evidence so that it actually fits or proves our thought is true. E.g. the only reason that dog hasn't bitten anyone is because he's on his lead

When we are looking at our negative thoughts, it can be very difficult to naturally accept any evidence which goes against our thinking, which can further maintain our vicious cycle.

Do you hold any beliefs that could be triggering your thoughts?
These could be things like "I'm useless" "I'm worthless"

Try to notice the next time you slip into this bias and make a note of it below.

Unhelpful thinking styles

These are some common thinking biases we slip into. See if you notice any you do, take a look at your thought diary to see.

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>All-or-nothing Thinking: Believing that things can only be either bad or good, a success or a failure, right or wrong, without leaving any room for the space in between. For example, 'If I don't get 100% in this exam I'm a complete failure' <i>Is there a middle ground here? Anything someone else would notice that I'm disregarding?</i></p> | <p>Mental Filter: When we feel low, it is like we are wearing 'grey tinted glasses' (rather than rose tinted ones when we are happy) and seeing everything as less positive and noticing more negatives in our environment. <i>Am I noticing the bad? Am I filtering out the positive?</i></p> |
| <p>Labelling/Critical Self: Giving ourselves global labels like 'I'm useless' or 'I'm stupid' which suggest we are like this in every part of our life, rather than in just the situation we noticed the thought in. For example, dropping a glass and thinking 'I'm such an idiot' rather than 'oops that was clumsy!' <i>Am I being harsh on myself?</i></p> | <p>Personalising and Blame: Taking personal responsibility and criticising ourselves for things that may not even be in our control. For example, seeing your friend yawn and thinking 'I must be so boring!' <i>Is there another explanation for this?</i></p> |
| <p>Shoulds and Musts: Putting extra pressure on ourselves by using words like 'should' and 'must', which suggest there is a negative consequence to not doing something, rather than saying 'it would be nice if I could...' <i>Am I putting pressure on myself? Is there a more realistic explanation?</i></p> | <p>Compare & Despair: Making comparisons between ourselves and others, seeing other people as much better than us, or only seeing the good in them and the opposite for ourselves. <i>Am I comparing myself to the idea I have of someone else? How might this be biased and unhelpful?</i></p> |
| <p>Catastrophising & mind reading: Believing we know the outcome of something before we have done it and catastrophising it e.g. 'It'll only go wrong if I try it', or how someone is thinking, e.g. 'I know that look – they're angry with me'. <i>Am I seeing the future in a negative way? Am I assuming I know what others are thinking without evidence? Am I assuming the worst?</i></p> | <p>Emotional Reasoning: Judging a situation based on our emotions rather than the facts, e.g. 'I feel sad, so I must have had a really bad day at work'. <i>My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts, is my thinking skewed right now and is that making me feel worse?</i></p> |

Thought Balancing

Now you are starting to understand more about patterns in your thinking, it's time to start evaluating your thoughts and work towards a more balanced and helpful perspective. It can be helpful to think of this as a court case, where we review arguments for and against the truth of the thought. This helps gather evidence to evaluate our thinking. Sometimes we can be so convinced of something because we have thought it for so long, but when we look at the factual evidence there is very little. If the evidence wouldn't stand up in court, don't use it! Try using some of the questions below to help you fill out the worksheet on the next page.

Questions to gather evidence FOR my thought:

- What is it about the situation that suggests my thought is true?
- Have there been any past situations/experiences which suggest my thought is true?
- Any other reasons why I believe this thought is true?

Questions to gather evidence AGAINST my thought:

- Is my thought a complete fact, or is it more of an opinion? Which part is an opinion?
- Is there anything that contradicts the evidence for my thought?
- How would my friend view this situation?
- What would I say to a friend in this situation?
- This may be my perspective on the thought, but what could be another?
- Where is this thought getting me? Will it matter to me in 5 years' time?
- Even if my thought is true, is it something temporary, or can I change anything to help?
- Can I identify an unhelpful thinking style?

Thought Balancing

Situation:

What situation did I notice my thought in? What were the triggers?

Thought:

What is the thought I am taking to court?

Emotion:

Belief:

%

Evidence For:

Evidence Against:

Reflection:

As a summary, what is the evidence I have gathered telling me about my thought?

Alternative Thought

Now you have considered this thought, it is time to use the evidence to come up with a final alternative and balanced thought. It is likely this negative thought will come up again, so having an alternative thought that you can remind yourself of is helpful. This is a thought that represents a more balanced way of seeing the situation, a way that is not skewed by prior beliefs or unhelpful thinking styles.

This thought should take into account all of the evidence, *i.e.* not be totally positive if the evidence is not totally positive. It has to feel believable in order to try and work towards that perspective.

Tips for Alternative Thoughts

Write a reply

It can be helpful to think of your alternative as a reply to the initial hot thought, so that we can use it as that. Try breaking down your hot thought into chunks if it is a bit longer and responding to each part of it.

Say it aloud

Practise saying your alternative thought out loud and see how it feels – if it doesn't feel quite right, you may want to look back over it and think about why. Are you taking all the evidence into consideration?

Keep adapting

If you do notice the hot thought and try to reply with your alternative, but find that you are still struggling to get past the hot thought, go back over the previous few steps. Is there any evidence you haven't considered, or do you need to add to your alternative thought?

What would I say to a friend thinking this?

This can be an easy way to encourage more self compassion to come up with an alternative.

My alternative balanced thought

Act Like You Want to Think

It's unlikely the alternative thought is going to shift your emotions completely, or that you are going to fully believe it straight away. It's important to practice reminding yourself of this thought in the moment, or even of the fact there may be a different way of viewing this situation. It is important to then start trying to 'park' the negative thought and instead tune into that alternative thought. You can always write the negative thought down and come back to analyse it again later. Sometimes we feel much more strongly about thoughts in the moment. We have to try to align our behaviours with the more balanced thought.

Take this example: If we balanced the thought "I'm useless at my job, I can't do anything" to "This is a difficult task that others would likely struggle with too, I've managed similar tasks before so with some support I'm capable of doing this". This is a great balanced thought, it's important we then act as if the balanced thought is true. In this moment the person may start breaking the task down, asking for support, taking a break and ensuring that they speak kindly to themselves when they struggle with parts of the task. These are all positive behaviours that are in line with the balanced thought, and probably in line with what you would recommend a friend to do in that situation. More negative behaviours that feed the bad thought would be procrastinating, avoiding asking for help, working extra long hours, not taking breaks, critiquing self, comparing self to others etc.

What can you do differently this week that will help increase the belief in your balanced thought?

If you keep practising balancing your thoughts it will become easier and easier to do. Eventually your brain will stop jumping to the negative conclusion and start seeing the overall picture. It takes time and practice. Negative thoughts will still come to mind, but you will find yourself focusing on them less and believing them less intensely.

Rumination

Rumination is a behaviour that we can all slip in to from time to time. It is when we dwell on difficulties from our past. It can lead to becoming preoccupied for considerable amounts of time which can lead to very negative thinking and become quite distressing. To some extent everyone dwells on problems, and sometimes it doesn't last long and can lead to resolution. There is a difference between this kind of thinking vs. dwelling on something and becoming upset and reaching no answer to the problem. Unhelpful rumination tends to focus on causes and consequences over solutions. When rumination takes up considerable time we consider it to be a behaviour: the behaviour of going over and over the same thoughts.

Take this example: Imagine two people see an old woman trip on a rug.

Person A repeatedly asks themselves 'How did this happen?' 'If only I had been there she might not have tripped' 'Why did I let this happen?' 'What's wrong with me?' These thoughts may naturally pop into our mind but Person A has started to dwell on them so they persist and become stuck, with little or no problem-solving and critical to self.

Person B thinks 'How did this happen?' 'What can I do to help?' 'What does she need right now?' 'How can I rearrange the rug to prevent this happening again?' This approach tries to understand what has happened and problem solve.

Do you relate to either Person A or Person B's thinking?

In your diary can you see times you may ruminate?

Switching off from Rumination

Five Minute Rule

If you find yourself ruminating for more than five minutes it can be useful to ask yourself these four questions. By going through these specific questions you can really understand whether rumination is helping you or not. Try use a pen and paper to write out your answers rather than just answering them in your head. Doing this helps create a distance from the thoughts as you focus on writing.

Have I made any progress towards solving the problem?

Do I understand something about the problem or my feelings towards it that I didn't understand before?

Do I feel less critical about myself than before I started thinking about it?

What could I do now instead that could help my mood?

Goal Review

Once you have been doing this for a couple of weeks review your progress towards your goals. Keep checking in with yourself in terms of how you are progressing towards them. We recommend you do this every week or two to ensure you are moving in the right direction. Goals keep us accountable.

Is what you're doing working towards your goals?

Is there anything you need to change to achieve your goals?

Is there any further support you need right now?

Staying Well Plan

To feel better and stay well, it is important to continue looking after your mental health just as you would your physical health, using what you have learnt far. When you notice you are feeling better it is helpful to acknowledge what you have done that has led to improvements in order to help stay well in future.

Remember, everyone's mood fluctuates. This is normal. There is a difference between mood fluctuating and potentially relapsing into feeling low again.

A lapse is a brief return to feeling low which might be very understandable in a variety of different situations (e.g. something goes wrong at work, difficulty in relationships). During these times we can experience the symptoms of low mood. As we have said, everyone has these moments and they are usually temporary. It can be easy in these moments to dwell on failures or be unkind to yourself - but don't give up on the strategies you have learnt and try to be compassionate to yourself.

A relapse is when negative thinking and ways of behaving that you have previously tackled start to spiral and make you feel considerably worse. These periods tend to impact your every day life and last for longer. During these times you will likely feel unable to apply the strategies you have learnt, so the aim is to identify signs of a relapse early on.

On the final page are some questions to help guide you in summarising your learning from this booklet. We recommend you keep this booklet somewhere safe to refer to in the future if you need to. We advise you keep checking in with how your feeling and how balanced your thoughts feel moving forwards.

What were you struggling with at the beginning?

What strategies have you learnt that have helped?

How will you continue to make progress and continue to build on what you've achieved so far?

What will you first notice if you start to feel low again? Your 'warning signs' (think about the thoughts, feelings, physical symptoms and behaviours at the beginning)

What will you do if you notice a relapse?