

FREE CBT 7:

The Nature of Thoughts & Cognitive Distortions

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The Nature of Thoughts

We obviously have millions upon millions of thoughts whizzing through our brains throughout the day. Our thoughts are a part of everything whether we pay attention to them or not. Thoughts, or cognitions, can come in the forms of words, phrases, images, memories, intuitions, impulses, and our own self talk.

Our thoughts –

- Impact how we feel and what we do
- Are often unconscious or at least we don't pay much attention to them
- Are believable – why wouldn't we believe them they're in our heads?!
- Are unexamined – we often don't spend much time thinking about our thinking.

Our brains are incredibly efficient and are really good at making short cuts and forming habits. This is because (very simply) neurons that fire together wire together. As we repeat thinking patterns or behaviours neural networks are formed in our brains and are strengthened over time and through use. It probably took you a long time and a lot of concentration to back out of a parking spot for the first time. However, as you did it over and over you have to think about it less and less and you get quicker and quicker at doing it.

This same concept applies when it comes to cognitive or thinking patterns. If we repeatedly approach challenges in our lives thinking, “I’m capable and I can figure this out,” then those neural pathways will get strong and we’ll likely approach challenges with a sense of confidence. However, if we repeatedly approach challenges thinking, “I’m totally incompetent, I’m going to mess this up,” we’ll likely be left feeling anxious and deflated when we experience the tough parts of life. Neural networks or pathways, whether they are positive and helpful or negative and problematic strengthen over time.

CBT invites us to get curious and to start examining our negative behaviours and thinking patterns. We don’t have to take our thoughts at face value as we can test them, critique them, pull them apart and put them back together.

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Cognitive Distortions

Thinking in negative ways or getting stuck in negative thinking patterns is so common, especially when it comes to mental health challenges, that we actually have a name for it – Cognitive Distortions or Unhelpful Thinking Styles. Cognitive distortions are based on a thought or idea that might be partially true or could be true but then are distorted and become extreme. Here is a list of some common Unhelpful Thinking Styles:

All or Nothing Thinking – this is also known as Black and White Thinking.

- o “I’m a failure if I’m not perfect.”
- o “All of those people are idiots.”

Overgeneralizing – Seeing patterns and drawing conclusions on very limited information. Being overly broad in the conclusions we make.

- o “I’m never going to succeed.”
- o “She always gets what she wants.”

Mental Filter – only paying attention to certain kinds of information and not other kinds

- o Only paying attention to the times someone has criticized you and not the times when they have given you praise.

Disqualifying the Positive – downplaying or discounting positive experiences or events in your life.

- o “I got two A’s and a D on my report card. I’m flunking out of school.”



Jumping to Conclusions – thinking that we can tell what others are thinking and/or predicting the future.

- o “That party next week is going to suck.”
- o “I tripped at the mall and everyone thought I was a loser.”

Catastrophizing – Taking one small thing in life and blowing it out of proportion.

- o “I didn’t pass that quiz, I probably won’t pass the class, that means I’ll likely not pass high school or get into university, and I’ll end up unemployed.”

Should – using the word should, must, or ought to ourselves and others. When we apply it to ourselves, we often feel guilty and when we apply it to others, we often feel frustrated.

- o “I should never have made that mistake.”
- o “Children should be seen and not heard.”

Labelling – using broad labels to think about ourselves or others.

- o “I’m a loser.”
- o “She is awful.”

Personalisation – blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn’t entirely your fault.

If we find ourselves thinking in one of these styles we can breathe a big sigh of relief because we automatically know that we are thinking in a way that is untrue and unhelpful. We then have the opportunity to challenge this way of thinking and to think in a way that is more balanced, fair and helpful.



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Try this...

You might want to try spending some time thinking about your thinking. When you think about yourself, others or the world do you –

- Often think in a certain way?
- Are there one or two Unhelpful Thinking styles that you find yourself using regularly?
- Can you challenge yourself to think in a different, more balanced way? How?