

A better way of thinking...



It may seem surprising, but external events on their own cannot directly cause feelings of distress. So what does cause us to become upset? Well it is our point of view or our thoughts.

Consider the following example. Three people are waiting at a bus stop. They see the bus approaching, hail the bus - and the bus just drives straight past without stopping. The first person in the line begins to jump up and down waving her fists in the air and shouting and seems angry. The second person in the line bursts into tears, appearing distressed. The third person in the line begins to laugh heartily, seeming amused. Now, the same thing happened to all of them, yet there were 3 different reactions. Clearly, it is not the event that caused the reactions. So what else was it? To know why each person reacted the way they did, we have to know what they were thinking. It turns out that the first person was thinking to herself: "How dare the driver go right past! I'm going to be late for an important meeting." Hence, she feels angry. The second person when the bus goes past he thinks: "Oh no. Nothing is going to go right for me today, I feel so miserable." The third person thinks "Hooray! The next bus is not for half an hour. I have a completely legitimate excuse to be late. I think I'll go have a cup of coffee."

A basic goal of the cognitive or a 'thinking' approach in therapy is to show you that it is the judgements you make and labels you apply to situations largely determine your emotional response. Events may be unpleasant, or situations uncomfortable, but they are not, of themselves, capable of causing someone to feel extreme levels of:

<i>Anxiety</i>	<i>Fear</i>
<i>Depression</i>	<i>Worthlessness</i>
<i>Inferiority</i>	<i>Irritability etc.</i>

Thus, your emotional state is often result of the way in which you evaluate or label situations, not simply a result of the objective characteristics of the situation itself. When you make irrational or unhelpful evaluations, or apply faulty thinking to such situations, emotional distress may result. You quite obviously don't do this deliberately, but over the years you may have developed patterns of thinking about situations that are unhelpful and distressing.

SOME IMPORTANT LEARNING POINTS

- 1: Your beliefs, attitudes & thoughts - strongly influence your actions, your emotions and your relationships with people.
- 2: Each person perceives (sees) the world and themselves differently. How we see the world, outside events and ourselves, is set by our

attitudes and beliefs. Two people can look at an event and see and think different things. For example, "Two people looked out from prison bars; one saw mud, the other stars".

3: Our thought patterns about the outside world and about ourselves can become distorted.

4: Thoughts, emotions and actions affect each other.

5: What happens outside of you will bring certain thoughts based on your beliefs and attitudes. Those automatic thoughts can bring certain feelings possibly a behaviour or an action response.

6: Life experiences shape beliefs and attitudes

Changing the way you think

This will take some practice. The first step is to understand what kinds of things go through your head that make you feel anxious, depressed, hopeless etc. The next step is to learn to look at each of these thoughts objectively, and decide whether they represent reasonable assessments of the situation (i.e. challenge them). If they are unreasonable, you need to change them to something more reasonable and rational.

Step 1: Identifying your Thoughts

Unhelpful or dysfunctional thinking can be difficult to change. It is not easy at first to determine what you are thinking about in any given situation. One reason for this is that many of our thoughts occur almost automatically.

However, the more you practice, the easier detecting and answering thoughts will become.

One way to get started is to use any feelings of anxiety, fear, or discomfort and work backwards. That is, if you feel uncomfortable, then look for the underlying thought that caused the feeling. In any situation or interaction in which you find yourself unhappy with feelings or actions, ask yourself:

How do I feel?

What situations have I been involved in recently?

What do I think of these situations and events?

What do I think about the other person?

What do I think about the future and myself?

The following features are characteristic of unreasonable thoughts, and may help you to identify them:

- *Automatic:* They pop into your head without any effort on your part.
- *Distorted:* They do not fit all of the facts.
- *Unhelpful:* They keep you anxious, depressed etc., make it difficult to change, and stop you from getting what you want from life.
- *Involuntary:* You do not choose to have them, and they can be very difficult to switch off.

To help you determine what you were thinking, you can also try asking yourself, "What just went through my mind?" or "What might I have been worrying about?" With time, you will probably find that you have a collection of particularly troublesome thoughts that occur in many situations.

Step 2: Determine whether your thoughts are rational

Once you have been able to identify what you have been saying to yourself, determine whether it was rational.

There are common patterns of irrational thinking, also known as cognitive distortions or cognitive errors. Knowing about these can help you determine when your own thinking is irrational.

Typical cognitive distortions include:

1. All or nothing thinking:

You see things in black and white categories. For example, "They said something unpleasant so they are a bad person," "I made a mistake so the whole job is ruined."

2. Overgeneralisation:

You see a single event as a never-ending pattern. For example, "I didn't get the job - I am hopeless at everything I do".

3. Mental filter:

You pick out a single detail and dwell on it exclusively, or make unwarranted conclusions. For example, after not receiving a promised phone call from a friend, you conclude, "they don't really care about me". Or while talking to someone, you notice them momentarily glance away and you conclude, "They think I am really boring".

4. Discounting or disqualifying the positive:

You reject successful experiences by insisting they don't count for some reason or another. In this way, you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences. For example, someone compliments you on something you have done, however you discount it by saying "They were only saying that because they are my friend".

5. Jumping to conclusions:

You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion:

- *Mind reading:* you automatically assume that you know that someone is thinking negatively about you and you don't bother to check this out with him or her.
- *Fortune telling error:* You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and feel convinced that your prediction is an

already established fact. For example, you worry about a presentation you have to give and think, "I know I will make a fool out of myself and they will laugh".

6. Magnification (catastrophizing):

You exaggerate the importance of such things as your mistake or someone else's achievement, or you shrink such things as your own desirable qualities or the other person's imperfections.

7. Emotional reasoning:

You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel bad, therefore, people will think I am performing badly".

8. "Should" statements:

You try to motivate yourself with shoulds, musts, and oughts. If you find yourself unable to do something, you feel guilty and demoralized; for example, "I should be able to understand this the first time that I read it". If you direct these should statements toward others you feel anger, resentment, and frustration, for example, "They should have known how I was feeling."

9. Personalisation:

You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event for which, in fact, you were not primarily responsible, for example, "I always bring bad luck."

Keeping a diary can help you become aware of such thoughts that you get in particular situations, and helps you detect unreasonable thoughts that are causing you to feel anxious, depressed and uncomfortable.

Better thinking is not simply positive thinking. It involves looking at yourself and your environment in a realistic way, a way that maximises the chances of successful coping. It is important to distinguish rational thinking from irrationally positive, or wishful thinking.

Some examples of the difference between irrational, wishful and rational thinking are shown below. In each case, try to identify the type of cognitive distortion involved in the irrational thoughts.

IRRATIONAL THINKING:	I didn't get the job, which proves that I am a failure.
WISHFUL THINKING:	I'll never get a job or have things go right for me.
WISHFUL THINKING:	I didn't want the job anyway.
RATIONAL THINKING:	I am disappointed I didn't get that job, but I can cope.

IRRATIONAL What if I can't cope with this? It
will be absolutely THINKING: the
worst thing that could possibly happen!!!!

WISHFUL THINKING: It'll be easy. I don't care how I do.

RATIONAL THINKING: I'll probably be able to cope. It doesn't
have to be perfect: I'll get it my best
shot.

It is often difficult to tell the difference between various
forms of thinking.
Here are some clues to what you might be saying:

IRRATIONAL *I must.....*
THINKING: *I've got to*
 What if that would be awful/unbearable
 I couldn't stand it if

WISHFUL THINKING: *It'll work out....*
 I don't care that.....
 It wouldn't have done any good anyway
 I'll will it to happen

RATIONAL THINKING: *I would like very much to*
 I'd prefer not to
 I will do everything i can to .

Step 3: Challenge your thoughts

There are four main questions you can use to help you find
answers to your irrational thoughts:

1. What is the evidence?

- Do the facts of the situation back up what you think, or do they contradict it?
It is important to be realistic about whether people really are looking at you, talking about you, judging what you do. It takes a conscious effort to make interpretations of the environment, and your own performance that are as objective as possible.
- Are you making errors of thinking? People who are distressed distort how they see their experiences in systematic ways. Particularly prominent is mind reading, fortune telling etc. Which of these errors can you find in your own thinking?

2. What alternatives are there?

There are many different ways to look at experience. How else could you interpret what has happened? Get as many alternatives as possible, and review the evidence for and against each interpretation.

3. How likely is it?

4. How much would it really matter?

Do not expect your belief in the negative thoughts to disappear completely, all at once. They have probably been around for a long time, whereas the answers may be quite new to you.

Keep practicing and persevering.

COMMON PROBLEMS IN ANSWERING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

"I can't think of alternatives"

Standing back, questioning, evaluating, and answering our thoughts are not something we normally do. You may well find it difficult at first to be objective and to find the answers that affect your feelings to any greater extent. Do not get discouraged if at first you cannot always find effective answers. Would you expect to win Wimbledon after six tennis lessons?

"I don't really believe the rational thought"

You don't have to be convinced. Treat the rational thought as a hypothesis to be tested. Then act as if it's true, and see what happens. For example, to test the hypothesis that you are always the centre of attention, try going for a walk down a busy street. As you pass people, glance at them to briefly make eye contact. What do you notice?

"I still feel anxious"

This feeling relates to the problem above. Since you don't fully believe that nothing terrible is likely to happen, you will not be free of anxiety. However, you know that you can cope despite feeling anxious, you know that some anxiety is a normal part of life.