

# WORKING WITH OUR THINKING

The field of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) emphasizes that negative thought patterns can have a profound effect on our physical and mental well-being. How we perceive a situation or even our day-to-day life can lead to higher stress levels and ultimately contribute to anxiety and depression. For example, ruminating about negative emotions predicts higher levels of depressive symptoms and the onset of future depressive episodes.[1] Likewise, higher levels of repetitive negative thinking are associated with symptoms and clinical diagnoses of depression and anxiety.[2] Research suggests that many of the thoughts that we think are repetitive and can be negative. This is often referred to as the negativity bias of our brain. Our brains are primed to pay attention to, focus on, and remember the negative things that occur. Negative experiences are like Velcro, they tend to stick to us causing us to worry or ruminate about them long after they happen.

When we're not paying attention to our thought patterns, it's easy for our minds to fall into a playback loop—thinking repetitive thoughts each and every day. Depression, for example, is linked to negative beliefs related to hopelessness and helplessness. Anxiety disorders are linked to thoughts of future possibility of danger and threat. When we start to pay attention through some simple practices, we can notice the quiet ways we get stuck in negative patterns and then we can begin to reshape our thinking in more constructive ways. Many psychological disorders can be treated and prevented, and stress can be reduced by carefully examining and restructuring our thinking to be more accurate.

It can take some work to retrain our thinking, as our thought patterns are often ingrained. Thinking of your mind as its own inner environment, take some time to reflect on the types of thoughts that you want occurring there. You might ask yourself, *What kinds of thoughts do I want guiding my life? What kinds of thoughts would feel supportive and make me more resilient in the face of stress? What kinds of negative thoughts am I willing to let go of?* With a little bit of work, you can choose to have thoughts that reflect the direction you want to be going and reduce the ones that keep you stuck where you've been. You can develop the capacity through enhanced awareness to notice the habits of your mind, and practice choosing thoughts that serve you well or release thoughts that are no longer useful from the past.[3]

Listed below are four steps to help you become more aware of your thought patterns and how to work with them.

## 1. EXAMINE YOUR THINKING

When you are working with your thinking, you may find it helpful to notice and write down your automatic thoughts, especially in stressful, difficult or challenging situations when they are more likely to come up. When you pause and begin to listen to your internal dialogue, you can step back and not get wrapped up in irrational, self-critical or negative

thoughts. Once you recognize that, you can actually choose how to continue. One way to examine your thinking is to identify any typical, unhelpful thinking patterns characterized as cognitive distortions. The following list of cognitive distortions is adapted and taken from David Burns, MD, *The Feeling Good Handbook*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1989.[4]

## TEN COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

1. **All or nothing thinking.** Sometimes called “black and white thinking.” If your performance falls short of perfect, you view yourself as a total failure. E.g. “Either I do it right or not at all.”
2. **Overgeneralization.** You view a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. You are overly broad in the conclusions you draw. E.g. “Everything is always horrible.”
3. **Mental filter.** You only pay attention to certain types of evidence. You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively. E.g. “If I can’t do it the way I did it before, there is no point in doing it.”
4. **Disqualifying the positive.** You discount the good things that have happened or reject positive experiences by insisting they “don’t count” for some reason or another. E.g. “It took me twice as long to finish that project, so I can’t do anything anymore.”
5. **Jumping to conclusions.** You make negative interpretations even though there are no definite facts that support your conclusion.
  - **Mind reading.** You imagine you know what others are thinking and arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, but you do not verify this.
  - **Fortune telling.** You predict the future and anticipate things will turn out badly.
6. **Magnification or minimization.** You blow things out of proportion (catastrophizing) or inappropriately shrink something to make it seem less important. E.g. “Since I am sick and can’t make it to work, I am going to be fired.” Or, “They were just being nice to me, they don’t really care.”
7. **Emotional reasoning.** You assume that your negative emotions reflect the truth about how things are. E.g. “I feel like a failure, therefore it must be true.”
8. **Should statements.** You criticize yourself (or other people) with critical words like “should,” “must,” or “ought.” The emotional consequence of these words is guilt.



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## 2. RESTRUCTURE YOUR THOUGHTS

The first thought that you have may be automatic, but the more you practice noticing your thinking you can consciously choose what you want to think instead. You can choose thoughts that are more supportive and help you feel good about what you are doing and going through. A great way to do this is with the thought restructuring exercise using the ABCD model developed by Albert Ellis.[5]

The ABCD model is an opportunity to practice restructuring your thoughts to ones that are more balanced, realistic and helpful with coping. You can also begin to notice the impact that automatic thoughts have on your mood, your body, your motivation and your behavior.

### EXERCISE: ABCD COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

It is often not events themselves that cause stress and upset; rather, it is our interpretations of and beliefs about the event that create the most distress. There are three basic ways that we interpret a stressful situation: as a threat, loss or challenge. Depending on which interpretation we make, we'll experience different emotions, think different thoughts and behave in different ways. When we view stress as a challenge, we think that our ability to cope is enough to get us through the difficulty versus feeling like we'll be overwhelmed by the situation (threat) or we'll be hurt by the situation (loss). This cognitive restructuring exercise can assist you in becoming aware of and editing your thinking to have more helpful thoughts. *Never underestimate the power of your own thoughts to help or hurt you.*

### INSTRUCTIONS

Take a few minutes to reflect on a stressful situation or unpleasant event that occurred recently (this is A or Activating Event). See if you can identify the automatic thoughts and beliefs that may have occurred in response to this event (this is B or Beliefs/Thoughts). Notice what the consequences were of this automatic thought or way of thinking, including the impact that it had on you emotionally, physiologically and behaviorally (this is C or Consequences). Then, practice reframing this thought to something more balanced and useful (this is called D or Disputing). One way to do this is to ask yourself the following questions:

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- Am I viewing this stressful situation as a threat, loss or challenge?
- What thoughts are coming up. Is the thought negative or a cognitive distortion?
- Is this thought helpful and true?
- What impact does this thought have?
- Where did I learn this thought?
- Does this thought promote peace of mind and well-being?
- What kind of thought would feel more helpful? If I viewed it as a challenge, what types of thoughts would I have?
- What thought would promote better peace of mind and better ability to cope with this situation?
- What thought would be more balanced and more realistically reflect the situation at hand?

To further practice cognitive restructuring, complete this ABCD Worksheet

A. – **A**ctivating Event: Identify the stressful or unpleasant situation.

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B. – **B**elief system or thoughts about the event (you can include cognitive distortions or negative thoughts about the stressor).

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C – **C**onsequences of the thoughts (you can include how it made you feel and how your behavior was affected).

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D – **D**isputing. Identify more realistic, balanced or positive thoughts to replace your negative or dysfunctional ones.

### 3. PRACTICE COGNITIVE DEFUSION

Sometimes when we directly try to challenge the content and accuracy of our automatic, negative thoughts and our negative interpretation of events, it can lead to increased levels of distress. When this happens, it may be more appropriate and useful to try another approach such as “cognitive defusion.” The cognitive defusion strategy comes out of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which is considered a “third wave” or third generation of cognitive behavioral therapies. In contrast to the focus in CBT of challenging and changing distorted thoughts around difficult, stressful or painful events, the focus of acceptance-based treatments is on increasing individuals’ capacity to be both aware and nonjudgmental of present moment experiences.[6]

Cognitive defusion involves shifting from trying to change certain thoughts that are considered “bad” to learning to view thoughts as just a thought, no more and no less.[7] It is a process of distancing, disconnecting, or viewing thoughts and feelings for what they are (streams of words, passing sensations) not what they *say they are* (dangers or facts). Defusion creates a different awareness of our thoughts by stopping, stepping back, observing the thoughts and feelings, and noting what is happening without judgement. When you observe a thought, you realize how it structures your world, but you can also realize that you are the one doing the structuring.[8] This awareness gives you a little more room for flexibility in that you might notice the thought, “I am having the feeling that I am anxious” which is quite different from the thought, “Wow, I am so anxious.”

Through this practice, you begin to notice the process of thinking as it happens rather than only noticing the products of that process—your thoughts. For example, suppose you put your hands over your face and someone asked you, “What do hands look like?” You might answer, “They are all dark.” If you moved your hands away a few inches you might add, “They have fingers and lines in them.” In seeing thoughts from this detached perspective (e.g., bird’s eye view), people have the possibility to identify a problematic issue, accept it and find a manner to live with it, which can decrease the level of suffering. Creating distance from one’s thoughts and feelings gives greater ability to be able to modify the behaviors and life choices according to one’s values and priorities.

#### **DEFUSION TECHNIQUE TO TRY: MILK EXERCISE**

One of the many cognitive defusion techniques to try is the “milk exercise” developed by Masuda and colleagues.[9] This exercise consists of

1) Say the word “milk” once and to notice all of the images and thoughts that are associated with it (e.g., creamy, white, cold).

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2) Repeat the word “milk” out loud for 60 seconds. Typically, what occurs is that there is a decrease in the literal meaning of the word and what is left is just a sound.

3) Then apply this same practice on a negative thought that causes distress by identifying a thought that you are struggling with or that occurs frequently. Then try to simplify this thought by reducing it down to a single word. Say this word out loud for 60 seconds without stopping. Take note of the distress, accuracy, and importance of the word and the thought that it represents after practicing the technique. Practice this daily for one week twice a day, until the meaning of the word and the negative thought disappears and all that is left is just a sound. Numerous studies demonstrate that continuous, fast verbal

repetition of a word produce a temporary decrease or loss in the word’s meaning.[10]

For more practice with this cognitive defusion skill, use the following form:

**EXERCISE: CREATING YOUR OWN COGNITIVE DEFUSION TECHNIQUES**

Start with a thought you are struggling with. Write it down here:

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Next, try and distill the negative sentence into a word that captures the essence of this thought:

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Practice saying this one word for 60 seconds out loud, as fast as you can. Then provide ratings of distress before and after practicing the technique, using the 0-10 scale with 0=low and 10=high.

**Practice Log**

Date of Word Practice	Distress Level Before (0-10)	Distress Level After (0-10)
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Now experiment with creating your own defusion technique. Write down some examples that may help you create some distance from this thought and make it something that you observe, but don't have to believe or take too seriously. Hayes and Smith recommend thinking about how a comedian would treat this thought, or the way *The National Enquirer* would handle this thought as a way to foster this sense of observing but not having to struggle over its content.[11] Write down some examples here and how this thought might be viewed differently (e.g., if it were spoken out loud by a comedian or written about in *The National Enquirer*).

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Now, imagine this thought being said or written in this different perspective. Don't stop until you are sure you have done it long enough to assess its impact. After you have used the technique, Hayes and Smith[11] recommend asking yourself:

- Were you better able to see the thought as a thought?
- Did the believability of the thought go down?
- Did the distress caused by the thought go down?

#### 4. BRING YOURSELF INTO THE PRESENT MOMENT

Despite your best efforts to try and ignore certain thoughts or even change them, they can be sticky and persist. Furthermore, the more you try and change them, the more you can inadvertently make them stronger. It's like putting wood on a fire; the more you pay attention to the thought or feed it, the stronger it becomes. When thoughts like these arise, try and bring your mind into the present moment by focusing on something occurring in the environment. Our mind can really only handle one thought at a time, so even just taking a deep breath can interrupt and shift the focus away from the negative thoughts. Eventually, like the fire, the thought will fade out if it does not have anything to keep it going. This contact with the present moment—awareness of the here and now, experienced with openness, interest, and receptiveness—is a core practice of acceptance and commitment therapy.

One technique used to practice coming into contact with the present moment is “SABER” developed by Zgierska and colleagues.[12] Often when something stressful happens, we tend to respond automatically and go into “autopilot.” Often this is not a helpful way to respond and can include automatic, negative thought patterns that cause distress and negative behavior. SABER can be used to step out of the cycle of engaging in autopilot, or automatic thoughts, and become more aware and mindful. SABER is meant to be a brief

practice and can be done anywhere. It can help us refocus on the present moment quickly and get out of our automatic thinking patterns.

### **EXERCISE: SABER**

**STOP...** Focus on the present moment.

The first thing to do is to STOP, right here and right now, wherever you are, and whatever you are doing, and start by paying attention to yourself. In your mind, stop here, and focus on this very moment. By doing it, you're breaking a cycle of the autopilot.

**ACKNOWLEDGE...** what is going on right now, in this very moment, in your body, heart, and mind. This pausing and observing means that you have stepped out of autopilot.

Start by ACKNOWLEDGING the thoughts, feelings, and the sensations in your body. Observe what is going on with you right now. What thoughts are going through your mind? Try to name and label your thoughts. Here again, as best as you can, just notice all these sensations, thoughts, and emotions. Observe them without judging. Notice especially all unpleasant experiences, any sense of discomfort, or unpleasant feelings. Rather than trying to push them away or shut them out, just acknowledge them, perhaps by saying, "Yes, there you are. This is just how it is right now. It's okay..." Just observe.

**BREATHE...** Focus on your breath—your anchor to the present moment.

Focus your attention on your BREATH and the movements of the belly, so that you are aware when the breath is moving in, and you know when the breath is moving out and leaving your body.

**EXPAND...** your awareness to your body and mind, and to your surroundings.

Now, allow your attention to EXPAND. Continue being aware of the breath, but also include a sense of the body and mind as a whole. See whether there is any tightness or tension in the shoulders, neck, back, or face, or anywhere in the body. If there is, just notice it, observe it, and don't try to fix it. Follow the breath as if your whole body were breathing. When you're ready, expand your awareness to what's happening around you. Just watch it, observe.

**RESPOND...** After this pause and curious, friendly observation, when you know what's happening in you and around you, now you are ready to respond mindfully.

Keep breathing and think what would be the best RESPONSE, best thing to say or do. Or perhaps you decide you shouldn't do anything, after all.

### **AUTHOR(S)**

“Working with Our Thinking” was written by [Shilagh A. Mirgain](#), and by [Janice Singles](#), PsyD (2016, updated 2023).

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