



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Thoughts and their impacts

The way you think about things has an impact on your mood, stress and anxiety levels. Thoughts occur automatically, and feel true even when they are biased or incorrect. Challenging the thoughts can help you to evaluate whether your thinking is accurate and helpful, or whether you may have lost perspective which can then feed feelings of distress, depression and/or threat.

Occasionally we can get stuck on thoughts that really impact our mood. When this happens, it can be useful to check whether we are using an unhelpful thinking habit. These are ways of thinking that are based on old rules or habits rather than the reality of a situation.

The following worksheet looks at common unhelpful thinking habits that can lead to emotional distress, and provides various strategies to help deal with them.



Common unhelpful thinking habits

Black and white thinking

This relates to times when we think about things in extremes. Things are either 'good or bad', or 'right or wrong'. Black and white thinking misses the shades of grey. For example, "if I don't get a High Distinction in this course, then I've failed."

Ultimatums

Watch out for times when you give yourself ultimatums. We often start these sentences with phrases like "I must" or "I should." Ultimatums can add a lot of pressure and aren't usually true. Sometimes it can be hard to accept the idea of being 'good enough' rather than perfect. Setting ultimatums and unrealistic expectations may stop us from learning and growing.

Overgeneralising

This is when we take one example from the past or present and apply it to everything. Watch out for sentences that start with "I always" or "You never."

Mind reading and fortune telling

Sometimes we're convinced that we know what someone else is thinking without actually having asked them. We also can fall into a trap of believing we know what will happen in the future, based on what has happened in the past. This sort of prediction may cut us off from being able to change.

Tunnel vision

This refers to those times when we selectively filter out information from a situation and just focus on one piece of the story (for example, focusing only on our weakness and ignoring our strengths). A lot of the time this means focusing on the negative and ignoring the positive.

Catastrophising

While there is danger in the world, we tend to overestimate the chances of things going wrong when we are under stress. We can also overestimate how important something will be in the future by blowing things out of proportion.

Double standards

Sometimes we have one set of rules for ourselves and a completely different set for everyone else. Ask yourself "what advice would I give my friend if they were in my situation?"



What can I do?

At times, we or others might try to offer nuggets of wisdom consisting of, “look on the bright side” or “there is always someone who has it worse”. While trying to incorporate the glass-half-full approach can sometimes be just the antidote needed for some, it is not always the solution for others. Sometimes we just do not want to hear these intended words of wisdom.

At times of distress, hearing these comments can be frustrating and difficult to apply or believe, especially when you are trying to challenge the barrage of negativity swirling around in your mind.

However, there are steps that you can take to help turn things around. By practicing thought challenging, you can learn to recognize unhelpful thoughts and distinguish them from facts. To challenge an unhelpful thought, you need to step back from it. When you become aware that you’re feeling angry, sad, anxious, or upset, use this as a signal to stop, think and reflect as you go through each of these steps:

1. Identify the situation

Take a moment to identify the situation that caused you to feel distressed. Take note of the emotional response you experience (e.g. frustration, anger, sadness, fear etc.).

2. Identify the thought

Our emotional response to a situation is always driven by a thought. If you’re having trouble identifying the thought, try working backwards from your emotional response by asking yourself “what would be so bad about that?”, or “what does it say about you?”. Consider whether you might be using any of the unhelpful thinking styles identified above.

3. Challenge the unhelpful thought

Look for objective evidence to support or challenge the unhelpful thought by asking these questions:

- ‘What’s the evidence for and against my thinking?’
- ‘What’s an alternative way of looking at the situation? Is there an alternative explanation?’
- ‘What advice would I give a friend/partner if they were in this situation?’
- ‘What am I predicting is going to happen in this situation?’
- ‘What is the worst thing that could happen, and how bad would that really be?’
- ‘Am I jumping to conclusions?’

4. Rephrase the unhelpful thought

Re-write the unhelpful thought, based only on the evidence. It might not feel particularly true or likely – that’s ok. This exercise allows you to recognise that there are alternative ways to see the situation, which can help to decrease the intensity of your emotions.

Remember, challenging the thought is not about positive thinking. It is about realistic thinking. If you are experiencing a really difficult situation, it may be helpful to engage in some structured problem solving or seek support from someone you respect.

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