

Session 9: Dealing with difficult and painful thoughts

In the last session we started to look at thoughts and thinking – both at the *how* of thinking and the *what* of thoughts. We made a distinction between thinking as an activity and the contents of our thoughts.

Today we are going to look at the *what* of thinking in more detail in order to ask the question:

‘Is there another way of thinking about things that would be more helpful to me?’

We need to start by acknowledging that human beings are not very good at thinking rationally – we are more influenced by our circumstances than we are generally aware of. Typically we use a number of mental shortcuts and biases to make sense of the world and what’s happening, both to us and to others. You can find a good summary of these common thinking biases in the chapter called *‘Thinking Straight’* in Hope and Butler’s book *Manage Your Mind* (Oxford University Press).

In CBT we try to help you understand the effect on you of a number of common, but typically unhelpful, ways of thinking that can be exaggerated in depression and anxiety. These include:

Polarised thinking: this is the tendency to see things in all-or-nothing terms. For example, telling yourself that something is either *all* good or *all* bad, or that it’s either perfect or a complete disaster, or has been totally successful or an utter failure. This is in contrast to the ability to see things as being on a continuum: rather than seeing the world in stark ‘black and white’ terms, we encourage you to look for the shades of grey.

For example, Helen had started to schedule more social activities – in the previous week she had phoned one friend and met another for coffee but on the third occasion she had cancelled an outing to the pub at the last minute because she didn’t feel like going. When she was asked what progress she had made towards

her goal of socialising more she said ‘none at all, it’s been a disaster’. Was that a fair reflection of events, in your opinion?

Reflective question

Write down an example of a time in the last couple of weeks where you were too polarised in your thinking and then how you might have looked at the situation more reasonably.

Jumping to conclusions and catastrophising: Jumping to conclusions speaks for itself – from time to time we all make an assumption that turns out to be mistaken – the friend that didn’t reply to your phone call turns out to have been ill, rather than not care about you.

Catastrophising is a special case of jumping to conclusions as it applies to the future. There are three ingredients. First, we overestimate the likelihood of something bad happening; second we exaggerate the awfulness of the event if it were to happen, and third we underestimate our ability to cope with difficult circumstances.

This makes us overly anxious and more likely to avoid a challenging but potentially rewarding situation. Notice how catastrophising makes assumptions about what will happen, as if we had a crystal ball and could reliably see the future (fortune telling), and assumptions about other people and what they are thinking (mind reading).

For example, Tony had been hoping to go back to work for a social visit prior to a phased return. In the days before he was due to go he found himself ruminating

about it. Tony told himself that he definitely wouldn't cope (overestimating the likelihood), that it would be horrible and awful because he would feel so awkward and embarrassed to see his colleagues (exaggerating the awfulness) and that he would never cope with the guilt and shame of it (underestimating his ability to cope). In the event he was nervous but found it much less difficult than he had expected much to his relief.

Reflective question

Write down a time when you made a catastrophic prediction that didn't come true. What did you learn?

Labelling: is the use of a simple label to describe a much more complex situation. Typically labels are lacking in generosity, empathy and compassion, whether for yourself or another person.

For example, Sue had developed the habit of labelling herself and others. As far as she was concerned she was 'a loser', her ex-partner was 'a waste of space', her children were 'lazy and ungrateful', people she met were 'rude and inconsiderate'. These labels helped keep Sue stuck in depression because she couldn't think beyond the label – she couldn't step outside of her feelings of hurt and disappointment that her life wasn't working out the way she'd hoped.

Labels, and blaming in general, helped keep her from feeling the pain of that disappointment at the cost of being permanently irritable and making her a difficult person to be around. The more difficult she became the more it reinforced her negative thoughts about herself and others.

Reflective question

What labels do you use about yourself and other people? What effect do those labels have?

Now that you've identified some common unhelpful ways of thinking let's introduce a technique to challenge those misinterpretations.

This technique is called cognitive reconstruction, which really means trying to find another way to think about the situation – it's a way of asking yourself whether what you're thinking is accurate and helpful and to be a fair judge of events. We'll practise it now.

1) First think of a recent time when you got upset about something – let strong emotion be your guide to upsetting thoughts because they usually go together. What was it that upset you? Write down the situation – where you were, what you were doing, what time it was, who else was there, and what else was going on. Write down how you felt at the time.

Here's an example to help you:

Last Wednesday afternoon. Waiting 25 minutes in a queue at the post office to get to the counter to buy a stamp to post a letter

Now write your example:

2) Now ask yourself: what was I feeling at the time - rate how strong the feeling was out of 100, where 100 is the worst that feeling could be.

Here's an example to help you:

Frustrated (60%); really miserable (85%) and angry (70%)

Now write your example:

Feeling: _____ (%) Feeling: _____ (%)

3) Now ask: what was going through my mind at the time? Write down all the thoughts you can remember.

Here's another example:

I kept thinking how awful the service was and how it used to be so much better. I started to think about how selfish the person at the counter was taking ages over something simple and how they couldn't even speak English very well. I thought about how I wouldn't be there if I was still at work. I started to think about what a useless person I'd become and how I'd never get another job. I started to feel really down and wanted to leave.

Now write your example

Once you've written down what was going through your mind, take a look at the list of thoughts and ask yourself, if I had to pick just one of those thoughts as being the one that is most upsetting, which would it be? Circle it – that's what we call the *hot thought*. Now ask yourself: at the time how strongly did I believe that thought, where 100% is that I thought it was a fact and 0% I didn't believe it at all.

Here's an example:

Hot thought: *I'll never get another job*

How strongly did you believe it? (%) 85%

Now write your example:

Hot thought: _____

How strongly did you believe it? (%) _____

4) Now this is the really important bit. What we're **not** looking for now is empty positive thinking – we're looking for **balanced thinking**, that is, an opinion that takes account of **all the facts** and is **fair** and **realistic**. The chances are that you've had plenty of experiences that back up the way you think so first of all we're going to ask: 'what makes me think my thought is true?' Write down all the evidence you can think of and try to stick to the facts, not opinions.

If you're not sure what's a fact then remember that it should describe something that happened, not be an interpretation of what happened: 'she didn't phone me' is a fact; 'she doesn't like me' may or may not be true but it isn't a description. Working out whether or not it's likely to be true will depend on what you have noticed that makes you think it's true – what you have to write down is what you saw or heard actually happen.

Here's an example:

Evidence for: I was only in my last job for 18 months before I had to leave it after going off on long-term sick; I was made redundant after 7 years in my previous job when they closed my department; I'm 52 and the chances of getting a job at my age are not as good as if I were younger.

Write down the evidence for your hot thought:

5) Now for the harder bit - the 'evidence against'. Ask yourself, is there any evidence that doesn't support what I'm thinking (or assuming) to be true. You're probably going to have to dig a bit here – after all the way we feel has a big effect on what we think – if you *feel* bad the world *looks* bad.

Here's some questions to ask yourself that may be helpful in uncovering evidence against the hot thought – under each one is an example – write your own answer in the column to the right:

<p>What experiences have I had that show this is not necessarily true?</p> <p><i>I got a job two years ago after being out of work for 9 months</i></p>	
<p>What would someone who knows me really well remind me of?</p> <p><i>Last time I was out of work I had the same thought but I did some part-time voluntary work that helped me to regain my confidence</i></p>	
<p>What small things might I be discounting or overlooking?</p> <p><i>I have friends who are in the same line of work; I have been adaptable in the past when I changed career; I can use a computer</i></p>	

6) Now let's think about 'missing information and assumptions' you might be making. Ask yourself whether there is anything else you need to know before making up your mind. Here are some more questions to help you – write your answers in the right hand column.

<p>What would you say to your best friend or a loved one if they were thinking like this?</p>	
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<p><i>I'd say that they have lots of skills that could be really useful - it is true that when I'm not feeling this way I am very practical</i></p>	
<p>Are you using a mental shortcut that's not helpful: remember polarised thinking; fortune telling; mind reading; jumping to conclusions, catastrophising and labelling</p> <p><i>I was thinking in very black and white terms and I was catastrophising</i></p>	

7) Now take a look at the evidence for, the evidence against, and any missing information or assumptions you're making. Taking *all* the evidence into consideration, ask yourself, what other ways are there of looking at the situation?

Here's an example

Taking everything into consideration I know my thoughts were affected by the frustration I was feeling. The more I dwelt on the negative the stronger my belief that I'd never get another job became. On reflection I can't say with certainty that I either will or won't get another job. All I can do is work on feeling better and taking time to look for something suitable. To do that I know I'm going to have to allow for times when I feel either frustrated or down. My family and friends can help support me if I let them.

What are your conclusions after looking at your example – write them down.

8) And now, whatever you decide about the truth or otherwise of your thoughts you still have a choice. What would be the most helpful thing to do now?

Here's an example

I'm going to keep working towards my goals in small steps and I'm going to use my activity schedule to help me stick to what I've decided to do, even though it sometimes feels like it's not making a difference

Write down what you will do:

9) Now ask yourself whether the way you're feeling has changed and re-rate your feelings on reflection.

Here's an example to help you:

Frustrated (40%); really miserable (55%) and angry (35%)

Feeling:_____ (%) Feeling:_____ (%)

It may seem a little long-winded but one of the great advantages of filling in an automatic thought record is that it slows down the process of jumping to conclusions and then acting on them in unhelpful ways. Even if there is some truth in your assumptions you can still choose to act in a way that is kind and compassionate to yourself.

We'd like you to have a go and see whether this might be of help to you. Here's another example filled out on a worksheet to help you:

Terry remembered getting upset after a phone call with his mother. It had been a Sunday evening and he felt the conversation had been very one-sided and dominated by his Mother telling him her news. Afterwards he had felt sad and lonely, and a bit angry. He found himself thinking 'Even my own mother doesn't care how I feel, no one cares about me at all'. He ended up eating a large pack of crisps and then felt even more miserable because he was trying to lose weight. In the end he watched junk TV without really enjoying any of it, went to bed at 1am and slept badly. The next morning he felt terrible and called in sick to work, leading to a warning from his Manager.

How could Terry have avoided the downward spiral? Well first he needed to spot his unhelpful thinking style before it led to unhelpful behaviours. That's why he decided to practise using the Thought Record. Have a look at what he filled in after the next time his Mother phoned him on the following Sunday then have a go at the Thought Record yourself.

Come back and tell us how you get on.

Until we see you next week, Good Luck

Situation (where was I, what was going on?)

At home, on my own, 7-30pm Sunday, just been talking to my Mother on the phone

Emotion (what did I feel?)

Miserable, wretched, lonely

Thoughts (what went through my mind?)

Circle the hot thought – how strongly do you believe it to be true (out of 100%)

Even my own Mother doesn't care about me

No one cares about me - I haven't got any friends and no girlfriend and frankly no prospect of getting one - (85%)

I've got nothing to look forward to - just more of the same

What's the point in even trying - there's nothing I can do about it

Evidence for

(stick to the facts)

I haven't been out to the pub for a month

I haven't had a date in over six months

I'm terrible company (that's an opinion, not a fact)

Apart from my Mother no one has phoned me for three weeks, and that was a sales call

Evidence against

(stick to the facts)

I haven't asked anyone to the pub either - I chose not to go when a group went out from work

I haven't asked anyone on a date and I stopped looking at the online dating service after my last date was a let down

I haven't phoned anyone either

My Mother phones me regularly

My brother phones me once a month

Missing information and assumptions

(what am I assuming?)

The truth is I'm really anxious about socialising because I'm assuming I'd be terrible company - perhaps I need to take things in small steps

I know I'm really sensitive about dating - am I putting too much pressure on myself to be in a relationship?

I wonder how it would go if I did try phoning my friend Alan - I haven't spoken to him for ages - I know I'd feel embarrassed but it might be worth a try

Taking into account all the evidence for and against and any assumptions I'm making, what other ways are there of thinking about the situation?

It's true that I'm not in a relationship and I've really let my friendships slip - no wonder I feel so down when my Mother phones - it highlights how little social contact I have - it's not really her fault, I should try being a bit more engaged and ask her questions - I think she probably feels a bit awkward about me being depressed and doesn't want to ask me anything that might upset me

What would be the most helpful thing to do now?

I need to think about what to do next - I'll phone Alan and ask how he's doing. If he's busy or can't talk I'll ask him when would be a good time. I'll take another look at the dating website as the first step - I don't have to contact anyone till I feel ready.

Thought record - taking another look at my thinking

Situation (where was I, what was going on?)

Emotion (what did I feel?)

Thoughts (what went through my mind?)

Circle the hot thought – how strongly do you believe it to be true (out of 100%)

Evidence for
(stick to the facts)

Evidence against
(stick to the facts)

Missing information and assumptions
(what am I assuming?)

Taking into account all the evidence for and against and any assumptions I'm making, what other ways are there of thinking about the situation?

What would be the most helpful thing to do now?

Automatic thought record - taking another look at my thinking

<u>Situation (where was I, what was going on?)</u>		
<u>Emotion (what did I feel?)</u>		
<u>Thoughts (what went through my mind?)</u> <i><u>Circle the hot thought – how strongly do you believe it to be true (out of 100%)</u></i>		
<u>Evidence for</u> <i>(stick to the facts)</i>	<u>Evidence against</u> <i>(stick to the facts)</i>	<u>Missing information and assumptions</u> <i>(what am I assuming?)</i>
<u>Taking into account all the evidence for and against and any assumptions I'm making, what other ways are there of thinking about the situation?</u>		
<u>What would be the most helpful thing to do now?</u>		