



# **A Course in CBT Techniques: A Free Online CBT Workbook**

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## Part 1: Introduction to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

### Can Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Help Me?

If you've found this online workbook, it's likely that you've been struggling with some kind of a challenge. Whether an emotional problem like generalized anxiety, a behavioral problem such as avoidance of important responsibilities, or a cognitive problem, like distorted or self-limiting thinking, cognitive behavioral therapy may be the answer you've been looking for.

Cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT for short, is a treatment that helps people build skills to effectively handle the challenges that life throws at them. Overwhelming research over the past two decades has shown CBT to be the most effective therapy for a whole host of problems: anxiety, depression, OCD, anger, phobias, eating disorders, substance abuse, assertiveness, shame, avoidance, procrastination, and relationship problems, just to name a few. Because CBT teaches people to solve their own problems by learning and practicing new skills, CBT helps people stay well long after treatment is complete.

### What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a short-term, skill-based psychotherapy treatment that helps people learn to assert more influence over their thoughts, behaviors, and feelings to effectively solve life's challenges. To appreciate how CBT works, it will be helpful to understand the core components of the CBT model:

- 1. Situations themselves are generally not problematic. It is our reactions to situations that cause problems.** This may seem counter-intuitive, because when something goes wrong, we usually point to the thing in our environment that started it all. But in most situations, it's the way we handle the challenge that dictates whether/to what degree the situation becomes a problem. Take the example of not getting the job you wanted. For some people, this could serve as a devastating blow in their careers, causing them to avoid putting themselves out there again and instead just settle for the jobs they have. For others, it may feel temporarily disappointing, but they're able to use that disappointment to assess what (if anything) went wrong, and bolster their training and experience to make themselves more marketable next time. It's not the situation, but the reaction that really counts.
- 2. Thoughts play an outside role in how we experience the world and how we feel.** Similar to the component discussed above, life events alone don't dictate our experience of the world; the thoughts we have about life events are what shape our experience. Technically, thoughts mediate the relationships between situations, moods, and behavior. This means when something doesn't go our way, it's the way we think about the situation that determines whether it's a permanent setback or merely a challenge to be solved. For instance, when we wave to someone we know on the street and they don't wave back, our habitual way of making sense of things takes over. If we're prone to self-defeating thoughts, we might think "They're ignoring me because they don't like me. They don't want anything to do with someone like me." This line of thinking might lead us to avoid the person and eventually lose contact with them, resulting in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. If we're in the habit of having thoughts grounded in our actual experience, we might think "They probably didn't see me," and not have even a second thought about the event.
- 3. Our behavior also affects how we think and feel.** It's not just that when we have certain thoughts we act a certain way. The converse is true too; when we act a certain way, our behavior affects how we think about situations. An example is avoiding situations we don't look forward to, for instance, avoiding talking to strangers at parties. When we avoid socializing because we're uncomfortable, our thoughts tend to fill in the blanks of our experience about what socializing is like. We might have thoughts that "talking to strangers is too uncomfortable," or "I'm no good at talking to people," "I won't have anything to say," or "They won't like me if they get to know me." The problem is, if we continue to avoid socializing, we aren't really giving ourselves the opportunity to collect evidence to the contrary, so our self-defeating thoughts are reinforced. We end up believing them even more and engage in even more avoidance.

**4. Our thoughts, feelings, and behavior are constantly influencing each other.** These components are interrelated. A change in one changes the others as well. Not only do thoughts shape moods, but moods can shape thoughts. When we feel a strong emotion for whatever reason, our thoughts tend to fall in line with that emotion. Take for example, drinking a double-shot of espresso on your day off. You might have been looking forward to all the things you were going to do today, but consuming too much caffeine can trigger physiological anxiety, and you may notice your thoughts take a more fretful tone. The more anxious we feel, the more likely we are to avoid things we otherwise wouldn't, and pretty soon the day is ruined. All of these components are constantly influencing one another.

**5. Changing thoughts, behavior, or feelings results in changes in the other components.** The good news is, we can use this system to our advantage. If we've been feeling depressed, small changes in thoughts/behavior can set off a chain reaction to feeling better. The more we tweak thoughts and behavior, the more we wrestle back influence over our mood. This is what we teach people to do in CBT, make small changes in thoughts and behavior to effect big changes in feelings.

Understanding this model of emotions can help you think about problems differently and can illuminate new ways of making positive changes in your life. All of the exercises in this online CBT workbook are designed to teach you these underlying mechanics of your mind so you can feel better and achieve your goals.

## How to Use This Online CBT Workbook

This online workbook is organized to help you learn and practice the skills that are foundational to CBT so you can apply them to whatever problems come your way. It's organized in such a way that most people will find it easiest to start at the beginning, slowly and repeatedly applying the exercises in each module, and only moving to the next module once they feel they have mastered the previous one.

## Will CBT Work For Me?

A lot of factors influence how effective CBT is for different people, but the one that matters most is the level of effort you put into practicing the skills. Like any new skill, it may feel difficult at first, and if you don't practice regularly, it might always seem difficult. The intention of cognitive behavioral therapy is to help you rehearse the skills so often that you don't need to think about skills when a challenge arises. You just do what needs to be done spontaneously. With this in mind, it's important to be diligent about completing the exercises as many times as you need to gain mastery of the techniques.

Other factors that predict whether people succeed in CBT are how ingrained the problem is, and how severe the problem is. If you have been struggling with depression for a decade, it will take more time and effort to treat than if you have felt depressed for only a month. Similarly, if your depression has you not getting out of bed for a week at a time, rather than just feeling a little down most days, you'll probably need more help. Although many people can benefit from using the self-help techniques in this workbook on their own, if you think you may have a psychiatric disorder, it's highly likely that you'll benefit most from working with a cognitive behavioral therapist. Much of the positive research focused on CBT has examined people who are completing CBT exercises at home while working with a trained CBT therapist. If you've been suffering for a long while or your symptoms feel very intense, you owe it to yourself to consider pursuing CBT therapy with an experienced CBT therapist. No workbook can compare to working with a trained mental health professional.

To find a CBT therapist near you or online, you can explore the links below:

[CBT Online](#)

[Personal Family Counseling](#)

## Part 2: Getting Started with CBT: Setting Goals

Before you can make changes, developing new habits and ways of thinking, it's important to understand exactly what you want to change and what differences you want to see. Once you have determined where you are now and where you would like to go, a beginning and an endpoint, you can use the skills and techniques in this workbook to help you progress from point A to point B. This chapter will help you develop a road map to guide you in the work ahead.

### Understanding the Problem

The first step is to develop a specific, concrete understanding of what you would like to change. This may be trickier than it sounds, because we're used to viewing our problems subjectively and sometimes vaguely—for example, you might have a general feeling of discontent, or say, "I'm unhappy" or "I can't seem to get it together." When we view our problems subjectively, it's as if we're sitting inside the problem and can't see outside of it. As you use this workbook to help make changes, you will move toward a more objective view of your experience and of problems. Viewing the problem from a distance, you'll be able to see it more clearly. Defining your problems objectively will help you start to make this change. With an objective perspective, you're working with the facts, not how good or bad something feels.

Use the following guide and worksheet to develop an objective understanding of the issues that you would like to address.

**Step one:** Start with identifying general issues. What has been bothering you? Some examples include low mood or depression, low self-esteem, shame, anxiety or excessive worrying, low productivity or difficulty getting things done, anger, habits you want to change like smoking or drinking, or difficulty asserting yourself. You might also be struggling with things that are not on this list. Really, any problem you're having or anything you'd like to change is fair game for CBT.

As you learned in the last chapter, it's our reactions to situations that tend to cause problems, rather than the situations themselves. If you find that your issues are external events or situations, like losing a job or breaking up with a romantic partner, try to think about how that event has impacted you. For example, losing a job might lead to sadness and low mood, depending on the thoughts you have about it.

**Step two:** For each general issue, describe what that problem looks like in your life. Be specific. Many issues can look different for different people.

For example, if you go to a doctor for treatment of a strange pain, you probably wouldn't say, "My problem is that I'm in pain" and leave it at that. You'd explain where you feel the pain, how strongly you feel it, when it first started, whether it is stronger at certain times of the day, and whether anything you do makes it worse or better. You might also describe how the pain feels—is it sharp and stabbing or dull and throbbing? When you feel it, does it come and go in waves or is it consistent? Here, you'll go through a similar process of describing the issue as if you were helping someone else understand exactly what is going on.

Are there certain thoughts, actions, and emotions that go along with the issues you identified? Here's an example:

**General issues:** lack of assertiveness, low self-esteem

**Specific Description of Issue #1** (issue: lack of assertiveness)

I have trouble expressing my opinions to friends and at work. I think that I have to agree with everything my friends say or they'll be angry with me. At work, I don't speak up during meetings because I worry that I don't know the right things to say. I'm afraid to ask anyone out on a date because I'm sure they would say no.

**Thoughts:**

"I don't know what to say," "I'm not qualified to be here," "I always say the wrong things"

**Emotions:**

Fear, anxiety, worry

**Actions:**

Going along with what other people say and do, hiding my own views

**Specific Description of Issue #2** (issue: low self-esteem)

I don't think that I'm worth as much as other people. I don't like myself and I don't think other people really like me either. I think people are just trying to make me feel better when they pay me compliments or say I did a good job on something.

**Thoughts:**

"I'm useless," "I'm not as good as other people," "Why bother trying? I won't do well."

**Emotions:**

Shame, sadness, hopelessness

**Actions:**

Not trying as hard as I could, pulling away from other people, isolating myself

## Setting Goals

Now that you have a clear understanding of your starting point, it's time to set some goals to understand where you want to end up. You'll develop goals that are specific and achievable—goals you can reach. When researchers design experiments, they determine beforehand exactly how they'll know whether they met their objectives (or confirmed their hypotheses)—not just "Patients who take Drug X will get better" but "Patients who take Y dose of Drug X will show a reduction in symptoms of illness Z compared to patients who took a placebo, as measured by A, B, and C." What does it mean to get better, and how will you know if you actually improve?

If you could skip ahead to after you have practiced all of the skills and techniques in this workbook for a good period of time, and everything went precisely as you would have hoped, how would your life be different? What exactly will have changed? Are there specific things you'd be able to do that were too difficult before? Are there certain things you want to be able to do?

**Step one:** Write down your ultimate goals. These will be changes in each of the general issues you described above. For example, if one of your issues is "low mood or sadness," an ultimate goal may be "improved mood."

**Step two:** As you already did with your general issue, you will now make your ultimate goal more specific. What does this goal mean? How will you know if you have met this goal? Use your specific description of the issues to guide you. For example, if one of your specific descriptions of an issue like anxiety is that you "avoid situations that make me nervous, like parties where I might not know everyone," one of your specific goals may be to "accept invitations to and attend more parties, even if I might not know people there." Another specific goal may be to "throw a party and ask my friends to each invite a friend I don't know."

**Step three:** Highlight actions that are consistent with your goals so you know if you're getting closer to reaching them.

See below for an example, and then complete your own goal-setting sheet.

**Ultimate Goal #1:** \_\_increased assertiveness\_\_

**Specific Goals:**

I want to express my opinions more, including telling my friends what I really think and speaking up in meetings at work. I want to ask someone out on a date, or initiate a social plan with my friends or call or text a friend out of the blue just to chat. I want to believe that I have something to contribute in conversations.

**Actions consistent with my goal:**

\_\_Speaking up in social and professional settings, initiating social contact and social plans

**Ultimate Goal #2:** \_\_improved self-esteem\_\_

**Specific Goals:**

I would like to feel better about myself, including thinking that I am worthwhile. I want to know that my work has value and understand and focus on my strengths rather than the weaknesses I see. I want to engage more with my friends instead of avoiding socializing because I might feel bad.

**Actions Consistent with My Goal:**

\_\_Connecting with friends and socializing, making lists of my strengths and reminding myself of them, trying harder in my work

Before you move on to the next part of this workbook, stop and write down your Issues and goals. Take time to think about your issues and goals as you write them down. The more thought you put into this portion of the program, the more likely it is that you'll have a clear path to obtaining your goals later. Remember, this is your blueprint for the rest of your work in this program.

It may be difficult to face these issues, to write them down, and to think about the changes you want to make, especially if you have been trying to avoid thinking about these problems or if you have been feeling this way for a long time and any change seems difficult. But you have just taken a big step toward making those very changes, just by understanding and clarifying the problem and setting goals. You have created a plan that you can use as you move forward, and that you can add to as you progress.

## Part 3: Applying the CBT Model of Emotions

Unlike more complex or traditional forms of talk-therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy simplifies the process of understanding and changing emotional processes. According to CBT, there are just a few powerful components of emotion to understand and work with. The benefit of this simpler approach is that it clarifies problems and the solutions needed to solve them such that with a little practice, anyone can understand how to do it.

### The Three-Component Model of Emotions

From the CBT perspective, there are three components that make up our emotional experience. They are thoughts, feelings, and behaviors:

#### Thoughts

Thoughts refer to the ways that we make sense of situations. Thoughts can take a number of forms, including verbal forms such as words, sentences, and explicit ideas, as well as non-verbal forms such as mental images. Thoughts are the running commentary we hear in our minds throughout our lives.

#### Feelings

The term feelings here doesn't refer to emotion, but the physiological changes that occur as a result of emotion. For instance, when we feel the emotion of anger, we have the feeling of our face flushing. When we feel the emotion of anxiety, we have the feelings of our heart pounding and muscles tensing. Feelings are the hard-wired physical manifestation of emotion.

#### Behaviors

Behaviors are simply the things we do. Importantly, behaviors are also the things we don't do. For instance, if we feel overwhelming anxiety, we might bow out of a speaking engagement. On the other hand, if instead we feel confident, we might actually seek out those sorts of engagements.

As discussed in the introduction, each of these components interacts with the other to create moods and emotional patterns. Changing one component results in a chain reaction that changes the others.



### How Thoughts Impact Feelings and Behaviors

Terry has suffered from depression on and off throughout her life. She has noticed the depression begins to set in after some kind of a major setback in her career or social life, but has thus far been totally unable to reverse course when she begins to feel her mood worsen. She is currently experiencing significant depression that started after she was laid off from her job due to an economic downturn.

Terry signed up for a networking event in her field, hoping to learn about potential job prospects. The day of the event, as she was contemplating getting ready to go out, she had the thoughts "This mixer probably won't result in anything. All the

good jobs are already taken, and when people find out I'm out of work, no one will consider me for an interview. It's a huge amount of energy for a lousy payoff." After considering these points, she felt heaviness and fatigue wash over her. She decided to lie down for a bit, but she only felt less energy after having laid down in bed for twenty minutes, so she decided not to attend the event. That night before bed, she had the thought, "I really wasted the day. I'm never going to get a job, and I'm never going to feel better."

In this example, it's pretty clear that Terry's thinking is leading to a negative chain reaction in her feelings and behavior. Having thoughts that she won't succeed only results in her having stronger feelings of depression: heaviness and fatigue. These thoughts also provide reason for her to engage in a certain behavior: avoiding the event. Finally, it's clear how the feelings and behavior end up reinforcing her negative thoughts, thus continuing this negative feedback loop.

## How Behaviors Impact Thoughts and Feelings

Albie has had panic attacks most of his life. When he has a panic attack, he has feelings of tightness in his chest, his heart pounds, and he gets lightheaded. Since beginning a demanding graduate program in engineering, his panic attacks have been on the rise. He has learned to engage in the behavior of quickly returning home or hiding in the bathroom whenever the feelings of anxiety begin, but recently this has resulted in him missing a significant portion of class, and he has fallen behind. Whenever he thinks about how behind he is, he feels an upsurge in panic symptoms, and the cycle ensues. Also, he has recently begun to worry that he will "lose control" and "go crazy" if he is unable to escape to someplace private when he experiences panic.

Here, it is Albie's reactions to his feelings that are the major source of the problem. While panic attacks are definitely unpleasant, they won't cause him to "go crazy" or "lose control," but having these frightening thoughts certainly causes his anxiety and panic to rise. Because the main coping skill he has for his anxiety is escape and avoidance, his behaviors are only serving to bolster the thought that panic attacks are dangerous. Paradoxically, this only causes more panic attacks. If he were to reverse the pattern of avoidance and actually ride out a panic attack in class, he might find that they are short-lived (usually lasting only a few seconds to a few minutes) and certainly do not cause him to go crazy or lose control. Moreover, it's unlikely anyone else would notice it was even happening. But because his behavioral routine does not allow for this evidence to see the light of day, he feels trapped in a cycle of panic and avoidance.

## How Feelings Impact Thoughts and Behaviors

Joni recently found out a close friend was diagnosed with a debilitating disease. Understandably, Joni had feelings of sadness, a pit in her stomach and fatigue, when she heard the news. As she went through her day, she had more negative thoughts about her job than usual, such as "I'm wasting my life here," and "No one takes me seriously." Feeling hopeless about her career, she engaged in the behaviors of not participating in the day's meetings and giving up after some difficulty completing a report. After work when having dinner with her partner, Joni had uncharacteristically bleak thoughts that "This relationship is not going to last," and that she would "be alone for the rest of her life." Joni was silent for much of the meal and felt awkward and lonely.

Sadness is a natural feeling to have when you get bad news about a loved one. In this example, the sadness Joni felt about her friend seemed to bleed into her feelings about work and her romantic relationship, which were not at all related to her friend's news. This is because her feelings of sadness essentially tinted her view on everything, not just her friend. Because she had strong feelings of sorrow, her thoughts, no matter where she turned them, were affected by that sorrow. Consequently, she withdrew from important activities at work and from connecting to her romantic partner. By disengaging from important parts of her life, she set the stage to feel even worse, ensuring that the cycle of negative emotion continued.

## Developing Insight with the CBT Model of Emotions

If you want to learn to manage your mood and act more effectively in the face of challenging situations, it is crucial to develop the ability to identify and distinguish between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Usually when we are overwhelmed, emotion feels like a tidal wave of discomfort, but we don't stop to clarify the components of that emotion. As a result, we have great difficulty doing anything about our mood other than waiting for it to pass all on its own.

By breaking an emotion down into its parts in the moment, we develop crucial insight into the factors that are maintaining or worsening our unpleasant emotion. Piecing out the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, we discover how to intervene: which thoughts need to be redirected, what behaviors are making the problem worse, etc. Practicing the skill of identifying all of the parts of the emotion using the CBT model, we become more skillful at steering our moods toward more effective responses, thinking and acting skillfully in the moment to actively handle the challenges of the situation at hand.

**Identifying Components of the CBT Model:**

During the upcoming week, choose several situations in which you feel strong uncomfortable emotions, and apply the CBT model to identify each of the components of that emotion. If you have difficulty identifying some components, that's okay. Just note the parts that seemed the most difficult to clarify, and pay special attention to them as the week goes on as you continue to track thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. For example, if you're stuck when it comes to identifying thoughts, make sure you apply more effort to noticing your thoughts periodically throughout the week. Just like strengthening a muscle through repeated exercise, by practicing identifying the parts of emotion, it will become easier over time.

Before moving on to the next part of the program, spend some time by identifying difficult situations, and tracking the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors arising. Write this down on a sheet of paper. In the beginning, it's best to do this after the situation has passed and some of the dust has settled. With practice, you'll find that it becomes easier such that you can pause in the middle of a situation to become grounded in the CBT model.

## Part 4: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Mood

Now that you have developed your road map for the changes you'd like to make, and you have some experiential understanding of the CBT model for emotions, the next step is to work on understanding, identifying, and monitoring your moods. The reason for this may already be clear: you are most likely reading this workbook because you would like to change how you feel in some way. Perhaps you have been feeling sad, worried, or angry. It might also be that it has been difficult to label the specific emotions you feel. This is a great place to start, and it is very understandable: emotions are complicated!

There are many different ways to feel (moods) in any given moment. Moods can vary in intensity (how strongly you feel them), and they can involve different physical sensations and thoughts. Sometimes you may feel a combination of many emotions all at once, and it's difficult to describe or distinguish between them. At other times, it may seem like your emotions have become numbed and you feel nothing. This chapter will help you begin to observe your moods, so you can identify how they influence your thoughts and behavior so you can start making the changes you want in your life.

### Identifying Emotions

Most of us aren't accustomed to separating thoughts from emotions. We tend to speak of the two interchangeably, complicating the task of clarifying our emotions. We frequently use the phrase "I feel" to mean "I think." For example, how often have you heard things like: "I feel like you're not listening to me" or "I feel like I did a bad job"? Those are actually thoughts, not emotions. Contrast those statements to the following statements of emotions: "I feel ashamed," or "I feel exhilarated."

Emotions can each be described in one word, and they are variations of the five main categories of emotions: fear, joy, anger, disgust, and sadness. Following is a partial list of different words for emotions:

Frustration Affection Contdescension Aggravation Hatred Lust Excitement Empathy Embarrassment Contentment Attraction Malice Desire Disdain Caution Gratitude Horror Panic Doubt Inspiration Anguish Disappointment Hostility Pity Humiliation Confidence Delight Admiration Longing Pride Dismay Enthusiasm Fury Loneliness Scorn Wonder Satisfaction Wrath Relief Jealousy Acceptance Alarm Wariness Apprehension Bitterness Bliss Bewilderment Exhilaration Cheerfulness Contempt Dejection Worry Elation Enthusiasm Ecstasy Melancholy Defiance Glee Nervousness Pleasure Spite Woe Suspicion Dread Jubilation Euphoria... to name a few.

### Why Do We Have Emotions?

Why do uncomfortable emotions exist if they seem to give us so much trouble? It's not uncommon to want to minimize or get rid of some of these painful emotions altogether. We have all, at one time or another, wanted to reduce the intensity of emotional pain or do away with it. It is natural to want to escape pain. But this workbook is not intended to help you ignore or eradicate emotional pain. Why not? Apart from the fact that ignoring or escaping emotions is not a viable long-term solution (as you will learn later on in this book), emotions—even the most painful ones—serve valuable purposes.

There are two main functions that emotions serve:

1. Emotions serve as signals to ourselves and motivate us to act
2. Emotions serve as signals to others and motivate others to act

**Signals to ourselves:** Emotions can act as cues to convey information about a situation. They let you know if something is wrong. Anger can signal that something unfair or threatening is happening. Fear can signal that you are in danger. Sadness can signal the loss of something you care about.

Emotions can then motivate you to act quickly—sometimes, before it seems you even have time to think. For example, if you see a car speeding towards you as you cross the street, fear would motivate you to jump out of the way. If someone tried to hurt your children, anger would motivate you to defend them. Disgust might motivate you to throw away rotten food instead of eating it. However, emotions are fallible—meaning they do not always signal actual needs to act. We have all experienced fear in the absence of danger—on thrill rides, watching scary movies, and startled by loud noises. For this reason, emotional signals to act should not be treated as facts, but they can serve as one source of information.

**Signals to others:** Emotions can convey information to others about how you feel and how they might respond. Even without speaking, our facial expressions, posture, gestures, and other body language clues telegraph our emotions to other people. If a friend sees you crying, they'll conclude that you are sad and be motivated to provide support and compassion. When a child sees that you are afraid of spiders, this conveys that spiders are dangerous, and the child will avoid them in the future.

## Monitoring Moods

Emotions are important and serve valuable functions, but they can also become overwhelming and unhelpful. This book can teach you to relate to emotions differently to achieve your goals. The first step is to observe and track your emotional experiences. Every day for the next week, take some time to reflect on the emotions that you feel, and record them on the following worksheet. You can set a time each day to think back and record the emotions you experienced (for example, every day after dinner), or you can record them throughout the day. If you choose to record your emotions at the same time each day, it may be useful to set a phone alarm to remind you.

**Step One:** Write a brief factual description of the situation you were in when you felt the emotion. For example: "had an argument with my spouse" or "thought about all the work I need to do."

**Step Two:** Write down the emotions that you experienced in the situation. Use the list of emotion words above to help you label them if you need to.

**Step Three:** Rate the intensity of each emotion at its peak, from 1 (mild) - 10 (extreme). For example, if you experienced sadness for half an hour that started as mild and progressed to moderate, rate it a 5 to indicate the peak was moderate sadness.

**Step Four:** Write down the feelings/physical sensations that accompanied the emotions. Did you notice any changes in your heartbeat or breathing? Did you notice a feeling of tension or heaviness anywhere in your body? Did you start sweating or shaking, or feel nauseous, dizzy, or lightheaded? Did you feel hot or cold?

It may be difficult to notice your emotions if you're not in the habit of observing them. Sometimes physical sensations can signal that you are feeling an emotion. For example, if you are working on an assignment and suddenly experience tightness in your chest, shortness of breath, and an increased heart rate, that may be a sign that you are anxious. On the other hand, you may be accustomed to feeling "numb" and find it difficult to identify any emotions at all. If this is the case, try to notice subtle, low-intensity physical sensations. Do you feel even slightly different at different times of the day (morning versus afternoon versus evening), or when doing different things (e.g., going for a walk versus watching television versus going to the dentist)?

Track your moods for a full week before moving on to the next module. Most people find it easiest to write this down every day at the same time. Consider placing it on your nightstand so you see it at the end of each day. Reminders in your phone can also be helpful. By tracking daily, you'll quickly develop more emotional awareness and pick up on important patterns in your mood.

# Part 5: Identifying Automatic Thoughts in CBT

## What Are Automatic Thoughts?

If you're working through this book in order, you've been spending some time identifying and thinking about feelings. Some feelings may seem predictable in certain situations, but others may be puzzling. Sometimes we feel an emotion seemingly out of the blue, too strongly for what's going on, or in a way that doesn't seem to fit the situation at all. The key to understanding feelings is identifying the thoughts associated with them.

Thoughts influence much of our experience of the world, including our emotional experience. In this book, we'll be referring to a specific kind of thoughts that we call "automatic thoughts." Automatic thoughts are the thoughts that automatically arise in our minds all throughout the day. Often, we are completely unaware we are even having thoughts, but with a little instruction and practice, you can learn to easily identify them, and as a result, get a better handle on your mood and behavior.

## Why Focus So Much on Thoughts?

Our minds are thought processing machines, creating and sifting through as many as 60,000 ideas in a given day. If we were to attend to each one of these, we would be overwhelmed by the flood of information. Thankfully, that's not how our brain works. Most thoughts enter and leave our minds out of our awareness. The brain is pretty good at filtering what it deems to be unimportant information and focusing on what seems to be most salient. It does this by focusing on certain aspects of a situation, then assigning some kind of meaning to those aspects, resulting in our thoughts and opinions about things.

This process works well most of the time, but sometimes we focus on less important bits of information, filtering out the more relevant parts. Other times, we assign meaning to something that isn't totally grounded in the actual facts of the situation. Take for example a pretty common experience, the job performance review. It's not uncommon for people who have a mostly good performance review to filter out most of the praise and instead fixate on the one or two areas where there's room for improvement. We call this phenomenon negative filtering, which means filtering out all but the negative information. Despite the majority of the feedback being positive, negative filtering might cause us to perceive the review as wholly negative, triggering emotions of disappointment, sadness, or anxiety.

The above example highlights a very common dynamic: Automatic thoughts have the potential to trigger intense negative emotions. Usually, we are more aware of the emotions themselves than the thoughts that trigger them. However, in most instances it is the automatic thoughts that play the largest role in determining how we feel, not the situation itself. Learning to examine these thoughts allows us to better understand and deal with our emotions, modulating them before they get too intense or overwhelming.

Take the following examples using the same situation of the performance review:

Joan received a performance review in which 90% of the feedback was positive, and 10% was somewhat negative. Afterward, she found herself seething with rage, unable to concentrate, and eventually leaving early to have a drink at home.

Dante on the other hand, received the same exact feedback, and afterward found himself to be in a good mood the rest of the day. When it was time to go home, he decided to spend a little more time working on a presentation he would be giving next month.

Now, there was no difference in the information given to these individuals, but there was a significant difference in how they felt afterward. The key to understanding their differing responses is to examine their automatic thoughts about the situation. Joan had the thoughts "I'm not appreciated here," "My boss doesn't know what she's talking about," and "It's useless even trying to do a good job here with these knuckleheads in charge." Joan probably had many other thoughts during the course of her hour-long interview, but these are the ones her mind singled out as most important, and as a result, she felt angry and resentful and decided that she couldn't finish or it wasn't worth finishing the day of work.

Conversely, Dante had thoughts of "It's nice to hear I've improved at this," "She thinks I'm doing pretty well in most areas," and "I don't have perfect scores across every domain, but I did pretty well in most, and can definitely spend more time to improve my performance in the areas that are lacking." These thoughts allowed him to feel more positive emotions throughout the day, and importantly, to feel motivated to be more effective. The above examples highlight the way thoughts affect our mood and our behavior:



Automatic thoughts can actually take many forms. They can be verbal as demonstrated in the example above. They can also be single words instead of sentences: “Crap!” Finally, many people from time to time have automatic thoughts in the form of images: Using the above scenario, Joan may have had an image of herself working hard at her desk while her boss and coworkers were all goofing off. Regardless of the form automatic thoughts take, we can learn to examine them to identify their underlying meaning and their connection to our emotions and behavior.

## How to Identify Automatic Thoughts

Some people find this skill difficult at first, but quickly catch on. The key to identifying automatic thoughts is to look for what comes to mind when an emotion arises. Example: Aaliyah discovers on social media that one of her friends, Ricardo, had a get-together with some friends and didn’t invite her. She immediately had the feeling of a pit in her stomach and identified the emotion as sadness. In that moment she asked herself, “What is running through my mind?” She was able to identify the following thoughts:

1. Ricardo doesn’t really like me.
2. I’m never invited to anything.
3. No one really likes me.

Given the extreme nature of these thoughts, a profound feeling of sadness is pretty understandable. By writing out her actual thoughts, however, Aaliyah was able to process them differently and see how extreme they were. Although she believed them to be true on one level, identifying and writing out her thoughts helped her to understand where her emotions were coming from. The exercise also helped her see she was making some pretty broad assumptions that she didn’t wholeheartedly believe. Afterward, she felt a little better, and some of her sadness lifted.

This process of recognizing thoughts as thoughts is a demonstration of what is termed metacognition. Metacognition is the process by which we develop an awareness and understanding of our thinking. As is the case in the example, merely becoming aware of the thought process helps us distance ourselves from our reflexive cognitive responses and reevaluate them. It is hard to overstate how powerful a tool this can be in changing our feelings and behavior. All of the skills in this book rely on metacognition as the foundation.

Sometimes it’s hard to identify a thought running through your mind, so another way of identifying the automatic thought is to look for the meaning of the situation. In Aaliyah’s example, if she were unable to identify any obvious thoughts she might ask herself, “What does it mean to me that Ricardo didn’t invite me? Maybe it’s that I’m afraid no one likes me.” The thought “No one likes me,” is the hidden meaning her mind has assigned to this event.

Another way of uncovering more hidden thoughts is to ask yourself, “What’s the worst part of this, and why?” Here the answer might be that Aaliyah believes she never gets invited to anything, and that’s painful because she concludes that it means no one likes her.

Finally, if these methods don’t deliver results, you can identify the emotion then work backward. The previous chapter identified some of the reasons different emotions arise. For instance, anger is usually a response to mistreatment of ourselves or someone we care about. Had Aaliyah felt anger after seeing that Ricardo had not invited her to the get-together, she could have 1) identified her anger, 2) determined that it was probably a reaction to some perceived mistreatment, then 3) formulated a thought involving being mistreated in the situation. She might have uncovered the thought “Ricardo isn’t treating me as he should because I’ve always been a good friend to him.” By using the emotion as a clue, we can play detective in discovering the mystery of the missing automatic thought.

## An Invaluable Tool: The Thought Record

A thought record is a tool you can use to clarify the thoughts responsible for unwanted feelings and behaviors. In this chapter we introduce you to a basic thought record to help you develop your metacognitive ability. In later chapters, we add to it to help you practice more sophisticated cognitive therapy techniques, such as cognitive restructuring.

Using a thought record is a skill that can help you identify and clarify the thoughts that are leading to more problematic emotions. By practicing identifying thoughts in challenging situations, you develop and strengthen the skill of

metacognition. With some practice, you can gain the ability to quickly identify dysfunctional automatic thoughts in the moment, and get some distance from them to lessen the intensity of your emotion.

**Instructions for Completing the Thought Record:**

It's best to complete a thought record about a difficult situation, or one in which you feel a lot of negative emotion. Thought records work best when they're completed close to the event. It's also helpful to have a little distance from the intensity of the situation so your thoughts aren't completely clouded by overwhelming emotion. Complete the following steps to get the most out of the thought record:

- 1. Identify the situation in one sentence or less.** Make sure you do so as objectively as possible without editorializing. For example: I said, "Hello" to Nicole, but she didn't respond. Not: I said, "Hello" to Nicole but she ignored me because she hates me.
- 2. Skip to the Emotions column.** It's easier to identify emotions then work back to the thoughts. Identify any emotions you felt at the time. Don't get emotions confused with thoughts. Emotions are one word, and are usually some synonym for joy, fear, sadness, disgust, or anger. Feel free to identify as many or as few emotions as are present at the time.
- 3. Rate the intensity of each emotion on a scale from 0-100.** It's not an exact science, so just go with your gut on this one.
- 4. Identify the thoughts running through your mind at the time.** Thoughts can be words, full sentences, or images. If you have trouble remembering, consider each emotion you identified in the previous step, then work backwards to figure out what thoughts led to that emotion. Rate how much you believe each thought on a scale from 0-100.
- 5. Complete one of these each day.** At the end of the week, you might find that you have the ability to gain a little distance from your thoughts in the heat of the moment. That is metacognition in action!

Complete at least three or four of these thought records before moving on to the next module. As indicated above, it's best if you can fill one out each day, as the next few chapters build on your ability to complete a thought record well.

# Part 6: Cognitive Restructuring to Change Your Thinking

## Cognitive Restructuring: Working with Thoughts that Aren't Working for You

Having learned to check in with your mood and identify automatic thoughts, you probably feel more grounded in your emotion, not being carried away by it as often. This chapter is devoted to helping you make big changes in your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors from that new, grounded place.

The skill we'll be working on here is called **cognitive restructuring**. Cognitive restructuring refers to the act of identifying ineffective patterns in thinking, and changing them to be more effective. More effective can mean triggering less negative emotion, seeing things more clearly, or enabling more skillful behavior. Cognitive restructuring builds on your ability to accurately recognize automatic thoughts and feelings.

Oftentimes, when people learn about cognitive restructuring, they think it has something to do with the power of positive thinking, that theory that putting a positive spin on negative situations leads to happiness. The reality is that extremely positive thinking can be just as ineffective as extremely negative thinking. Thoughts of being certain that you're going to do poorly on a first date can cause the date to go poorly for sure. But assuming a date will go well no matter what, might cause you to be less concerned about how you interact with your date, also resulting in the date going poorly.

Cognitive restructuring is not about flipping to the positive extreme. There's a term for that: it's called denial, and it's not a terribly effective coping tool. Cognitive restructuring is concerned with developing a more sophisticated viewpoint that considers both positive and negative perspectives. The result is being able to adopt a thought that triggers less negative emotion and is more effective at helping you achieve your aims.

Sometimes you may feel an immediate positive shift in your mood having restructured a dysfunctional thought. Other times, you may have to rehearse a new way of thinking about a challenging situation before it starts to sink in and influence your feelings. The most important part of cognitive restructuring is practicing regularly until it becomes automatic, happening without any extra effort on your part.

### Steps for Cognitive Restructuring

**Step 1: Record the situation, thoughts, and feelings** on your cognitive restructuring thought record (below). Just as instructed in the last chapter, choose a situation that triggered negative thoughts and feelings, and break it into its component parts. What is important in cognitive restructuring is that you identify as many thoughts associated with the negative emotion(s) as possible. Don't just stop at one thought.

**Step 2: Pick one automatic thought from the list you created**, the one that feels most responsible for your negative emotion. Focus on the thought that seems to be associated with the most distress. If that's difficult to determine, it may be helpful to identify the strongest emotion, then figure out which thought provokes the majority of that emotion. For instance, in a situation in which you feel anger, sadness, and disappointment, if anger is the strongest emotion, find the thought that feels like it's the one that generates the most anger. Before you proceed to the next step, make sure you've transformed your thought into a statement. Here are some examples:

Automatic thought: "What if I fail the exam?" Transformed into a statement: "I will fail the exam."

Automatic thought: "Oh crap!" Transformed into a statement: "I really messed up big time."

Automatic thought: (an image of not being able to get through a sentence without stuttering). Transformed into a statement: "I will stutter, and they'll think I'm a fool."

Having reformulated your thought into a statement if necessary, now you can move on to step three.

**Step 3: Develop different points of view about the situation.** Think about the situation and the automatic thought from as many angles as you need in order to start to think and feel differently. There are countless ways to do this, but here it's better to work smart, not hard. There are several probing questions you can ask yourself that are bound to help you discover new perspectives on the situation:

#### 1. What is the effect of believing this thought? What would happen if I didn't believe this thought?

Answering these questions forces us to face the consequences of having a particular thought, and pragmatically determine whether the thought is helpful or not. Take the following scenario as an example: You are up for a promotion at work but find out that another co-worker was picked over you. Disappointment is a natural response to this, but if you have the

thought “I’ll never be able to get ahead,” how does this thought actually function in your life? Probably it causes you to feel worse, turning disappointment into depression or despair. It probably also saps you of your energy and confidence, making it harder to do well at your job and other areas of your life. In this way, the thought functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more you ruminate on the thought, the worse you feel and the worse your work performance will be, making it less likely to be chosen for a promotion next time.

Now what would be the effect of not believing this? Well, for one you might feel disappointment, but not despair. You would probably recover more quickly, and be more likely to strategize ways you could improve your performance to receive that promotion in the future. And you would also probably feel better in general. Having compared the effect of believing the automatic thought with not believing it, you can determine whether or not it’s really working for you. If it’s not helpful, then continue to look at the situation from different angles by continuing to answer the questions below.

## **2. What is the evidence supporting this thought? What is the evidence against this thought?**

These questions help you determine the accuracy of your automatic thought. If the thought is inaccurate, you’re working with bad information and are thus unable to make good decisions about how to proceed. Using the same example of getting passed over for a promotion, the evidence for the thought “I’ll never be able to get ahead” is:

- I worked hard for this promotion.
- I believe I am a lot more qualified than the person who received it.
- This promotion was the only way for me to get ahead.
- I’m a total failure.
- If I can’t get this promotion, I won’t get any other promotion.
- My boss hates me.

By considering only these ideas, it’s not surprising that you would come to the conclusion that you’ll never be able to get ahead. It’s probably the case that there is more to the story though. Now let’s answer the second part: What is the evidence against this thought? Just be prepared that this question may be harder to answer than the first question because we might not be used to venturing outside of our normal thinking patterns.

- I don’t need a promotion to get ahead because I can get ahead in other ways, such as taking on increased responsibility.
- Just because I didn’t get a promotion now doesn’t mean I can’t get one in the future when I’ll have more experience.
- I’m good at what I do, so I’m bound to get a promotion, if not here, at another company.
- This is just one setback. I will have lots of opportunities for advancement throughout my career.
- I can figure out what I was lacking this time to bolster that part of my resume and experience so I’m prepared the next time around.

Notice these thoughts are not 100% positive. What they are is effective in making this situation seem, though disappointing, manageable. Sometimes, when you find it hard to come up with evidence against your automatic thought, you can look over the ‘evidence for’ list and see if there are any logical fallacies or half-truths there. The thought “I don’t need a promotion to get ahead because I can get ahead in other ways...” is the counterpoint to the thought “There was no other way to get ahead...” Pretend you’re a defense attorney when you’re answering this second part of the question, and try to pick apart the ‘evidence for’ list. Would that piece of evidence hold up in court, or does it seem flimsy? By deliberately reviewing the evidence for and the evidence against the thought, you’re able to consider the matter in a more thoughtful, intentional way, and determine where the quality evidence actually lies.

## **3. Is there an alternative explanation?**

Asking yourself if there’s an alternative explanation challenges you to consider possibilities you probably had not previously. In other words, answering this question forces us to realize that our automatic thought is merely an assumption, and that we should give it the same weight as we would any other assumption or guess.

Let’s use a different example this time. Yvette has been feeling sad because her friend, Annika “never” texts her, and Yvette has thoughts that she “always is the one to text first.” Yvette has the automatic thought, “Annika doesn’t really like me that much, she just responds to be polite.” Yvette might be totally right, but without evidence, this thought is nothing

more than an assumption. Identifying a list of alternative explanations might help her consider other possibilities and loosen her grip on this assumption:

- Maybe she just doesn't like texting.
- Maybe she's just very busy.
- Maybe Annika feels like she would bother Yvette to text out of the blue. (This is actually pretty common).
- Maybe she's socially anxious, so she waits for Yvette to text first.
- Maybe texting isn't that important to her.
- Maybe she's gotten used to relying on Yvette to text first because she usually does.
- Maybe she's trying to cut down on her screen time.

Some of these explanations might be more plausible than others, but the fact is that without any evidence, you have little reason to believe your assumption over any one of these other explanations. By considering different explanations for a challenging problem, you open the door to new possibilities, and can more effectively navigate the situation and problem-solve. You also end up withdrawing some of your investment in the automatic thought, helping you feel better about the event and improve your mood.

#### **4. What's the worst that could happen? Would I survive it? What's the best that could happen? What's most likely?**

In situations in which you fear a certain future outcome (think anxiety-provoking situations), it's helpful to identify the whole range of possibilities. Ordinarily, when we're anxious about something, we fixate on the worst possible outcome. The reality is that the worst outcome is usually not the likely outcome, so we overwhelm ourselves with negative emotion needlessly.

Let's start with the first question: What is the worst that could happen? Here is where you actually flesh out in detail what you're afraid will transpire. Using the texting example from question 3, let's imagine Yvette was considering confronting Annika to ask why she doesn't text. Thinking about this conversation, Yvette might have written down the following worst-case scenario:

Annika will be angry with me for bringing this up, say that she never liked me, and tell me to never talk to her again.

This is a fully-fleshed out worst-case scenario. Sometimes people aren't specific in their answer to this question. Consider the following examples:

- It will be bad.
- I'll be nervous.
- It won't go well.

What's missing in these examples is the detail. What will happen that will be "bad?" What will "It won't go well" look like? When developing the worst-case scenario, you should have a detailed idea in your mind of what will go wrong. But you're not done yet. After you identify the worst-case scenario ask yourself the following questions about it:

Would I survive it?

What could I do to cope with it if it did happen?

How would I feel a week later? A month later? A year?

If I looked back at this from the future, why might I think it was actually good for me?

Going through these additional questions will help put the worst-case scenario into perspective and make it feel more manageable. Let's see how Yvette might have answered these questions:

It would feel miserable, but I would definitely survive it. If it did happen, I could reach out to another friend or my sister for support and momentary distraction. A week later I'd probably still feel pretty sad about it, but it would feel more manageable. A month later I would be disappointed when I thought about it, but I probably wouldn't think about it that much. A year later I would have moved on. It might actually be good for me, because if she really reacted this cruelly, I wouldn't want her or anyone like her as a friend anyway.

Next, identify the best-case scenario. Just like the worst-case, the best case scenario usually isn't the most likely. Unlike the worst-case scenario though, the best-case often doesn't get much airtime in our minds. When we're anxious, it's much

easier to consider everything that might go wrong rather than everything that might go right. To get perspective, it's necessary to stretch our minds a little and consider the full spectrum of possibilities. Here's an example:

Annika will be very understanding and tell me she didn't text me first because she was afraid she would bother me, but now that she knows better, she'll text more often. Then because of this conversation, we'll feel closer and be better friends in the future.

Totally possible, but definitely the best-case. Finally, having re-calibrated by considering both the best- and worst-case scenarios, it's time to answer the final question: What is most likely to happen? There are a number of ways of coming to that answer. One way is to find something halfway between the best and worst cases. Another, and probably a more effective way, is to consider as much evidence as you can and come to an educated guess. That might sound like this:

Honestly, I don't know why Annika doesn't text first, but if I bring it up, she'll probably be understanding as she usually is. That's one of the reasons I'm friends with her. She'll also probably be more mindful of texting me more frequently in the future because deep down, I know she really does like me because we usually have a pretty good time together.

Having identified the most likely scenario, you may feel some of your anxiety lift. You will also probably be better able to imagine and plan for the actual situation.

#### **5. If my friend \_\_\_\_\_ were in this situation, what would I tell them?**

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to give advice or support to someone else, but you come up short when trying to access that wellspring of wisdom when you need it yourself? Sometimes situations feel a lot worse because we're unable to get out of our own heads. This probing question is a handy way of allowing us to depersonalize it, meaning remove all our own biases about the situation, and to see it more clearly. The way to do it is to pick one of your actual friends and think about how you might respond if they came to you for advice. Let's consider the following situation:

Donovan has been lending his sister money since she lost her job several months ago. Initially, he thought it was a one-time loan, but his sister keeps coming back to him for more, and he's concerned she isn't even trying that hard to find a job. Since he's been lending her money, he's had to make some significant cuts in his spending. Donovan wants to tell her he can't afford to give her any more, but he feels guilty when he thinks about saying no next time. He's afraid he'll ruin their relationship if he does.

For Donovan, this feels like an intractable situation with no solution. To answer this probing question, he chooses his friend Debra, and imagines she told him the same exact story. He finds it easier to encourage Debra to do the right thing:

Debra, you're not responsible for your sister. She's an adult, and while it's good of you to help her, she is responsible for solving her own problems. You might actually be more helpful to her if you offer support in different ways, like helping her find a job or apply for unemployment. She'll probably be disappointed, but if she cares about you, she'll understand.

Notice this answer isn't just sugarcoating the problem or dismissing the possibility of a negative outcome with blithe platitudes. It's an actual attempt to solve the problem at hand. You might notice that this answer seems to draw from the answers to some of the other probing questions in this thought record. I find this question is most helpful after answering as many of the other questions as are relevant to the situation at hand. That way, you can consider all of the various perspectives you've been developing, then boil it all down into some good advice.

#### **6. What can I do about this?**

We save this question for last because we usually come up with the best action plan after I've mulled over the situation from a number of different angles, and feel I have the clearest sense of what's actually going on. Sometimes, even in really unpleasant circumstances, asking yourself what can be done helps to change your mindset from being a passive victim of circumstance to being an active player who can shape the course of events. Ask yourself: How might I be able to effectively deal with this situation? What are the ways I can influence the others involved in order to change things? How can I use the adversity to at least partly work in my favor? By shifting your orientation to the problem, positioning yourself to proactively work with it, you might feel increased confidence. You'll also turn your mind from ruminating on negative automatic thoughts to identifying ways to succeed. The less time you spend of unhelpful thinking, the better you'll feel, and the more you'll be able to handle adversity. There are two steps to answering this probing question:

1. Brainstorm possible solutions
2. Identify the most effective solutions and implement them.

Let's use this example: Ayala sent out a report with a significant error to the board members of the company where she works. Her boss met with her privately, and in the heat of the moment told Ayala she better "shape up" or she'll "be toast." Afterward, Ayala was understandably shaken. She sat down once she was feeling a little calmer and brainstormed things she could do about this event. The rules for brainstorming are 1. Write out as many solutions as possible, no matter how

harebrained they seem, and 2. Don't edit or consider the effectiveness of any solution until you've finished the list. This is the brainstorming list Ayala came up with:

1. Use this as an excuse to more actively look for a job more aligned with my career goals.
2. Win the lottery and quit.
3. Apologize sincerely to the boss and ask what steps she would recommend in remedying the problem.
4. Create a system that will keep this from happening again and present it to the boss.
5. Reach out to some of the board members to explain what happened from my perspective rather than let them jump to their own conclusions.
6. Blame another co-worker.
7. See this situation as a sign I might need to apply more effort in double-checking my work.
8. Once the boss has cooled off, make the case using this event as evidence that I could use more help in the office.
9. Accept that everyone makes mistakes and do my best to learn from this one.

As is evident from this list, Ayala did not hold back. Some of these ideas are pretty unwise. Blaming her co-workers for her mistakes or hoping that she wins the lottery are not the wisest ways of managing this challenge. By giving herself permission to consider all options though, she was able to come up with solutions she would have otherwise discounted immediately, such as deciding to look for a better job. After brainstorming, she ruled out the unfeasible ideas and decided to create a system for double-checking her work in the future. Ayala also decided now was as good a time as any to start exploring career options she was more excited about. At the end of the exercise, Ayala noticed she was focused more on ideas about what she could do rather than the image of her boss's face chewing her out. Consequently, Ayala felt a lot better about the situation.

To reiterate, answering this probing question generally works best after you've answered some of the other questions on the thought record. Its aim is to redirect your thoughts from those of helplessness, hopelessness, or victimization to thoughts of confidence and empowerment. You may find that you feel a lot better after your problem-solving session, and as an added bonus, you'll have an action plan to begin solving the problem.

**Step 4: Craft an alternative response.** Having answered a few of these questions, you may find that you already feel better. To get the most benefit though, challenge yourself to create one statement that encapsulates the answers to the probing questions, or at least the most powerful components of them. We call this the alternative response. You can bring to mind this alternative response whenever the old automatic thought occurs to you. Although it's hard to replace thoughts, allowing the new alternative response to coexist with the old automatic thought can do a lot to lighten your mood and help you get back on track.

It can help to write down and place this alternative response wherever you need it. Have it pop up as a reminder on your phone before meetings. Set it as your desktop background. Write it on a post-it and put it on the refrigerator door. Whatever system you devise, the more you think your alternative response, the more it will occur to you naturally, you'll believe it more, and you'll feel better when you bring it to mind.

The more of these thought records you complete using cognitive restructuring, the easier they will become. After some practice, you should be able to construct an alternative response in the moment, without having to write out a thought record.

Completing a thought record using cognitive restructuring to develop an alternative response is one of the most powerful ways of addressing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in cognitive behavioral therapy, so it's important that you practice this skill as much as you can until it feels natural. Many people never move beyond cognitive restructuring because it addresses all of their needs, so spend some time on this skill. Our recommendation is that you complete a thought record with cognitive restructuring every day for at least a week before moving to the next module. With time, you'll find you naturally engage in this investigative process mentally whenever you meet with a challenging situation.

# Part 7: CBT for Cognitive Distortions

## What are Cognitive Distortions?

Now that you have spent some time observing your thoughts and investigating them through cognitive restructuring, you may have noticed some patterns in thinking—types of thoughts that seem to come up again and again. We all develop mental habits—certain ways of thinking—over time. Some of these mental habits can lead us to consistently interpret situations in unhelpful ways, inconsistent with the facts of a situation, or leave out an important part of the picture. We all do this at times, usually without noticing it. It can be helpful to begin to identify these “cognitive distortions” when they occur.

For example, have you ever known someone who, when you would share a new idea or plan, always seemed to respond with some version of: “Well that won’t work, and here’s why...”? It might seem like no matter what you proposed, all this person could see were all the many ways your plan might fail—never the benefits or the possibilities for success. You’ve even probably had these types of thoughts yourself. This is an example of one type of cognitive distortion, negative filtering.

The reality is, whether or not you consider these thoughts to be “distorted,” in order to function in the world, we need mental shortcuts—quick ways of making sense of a situation without wasting too much energy thinking about it. Oftentimes, these shortcuts work pretty well. When you’re at the supermarket buying apples, the shortcut of “all-or-nothing thinking” does its job. You see a bruised apple... bad apple. You see an apple without any flaws... good apple. We don’t have to examine the apple in detail, devise a list of pros and cons, or engage in any kind of analysis to figure out which apples are the ones we want to take home.

It’s when we apply these shortcuts ineffectively that they become cognitive distortions. All-or-nothing thinking works pretty well for produce, but when we apply the same shortcut to our spouse, the slightest flaw becomes magnified, and we start to develop resentment toward them. When we apply it to our work, anything short of perfect gets cast as a failure. When intense emotions are present, it’s likely there’s at least one cognitive distortion muddying the waters of our thinking. Below you’ll find descriptions of several common cognitive distortions.

### **Jumping to Conclusions (AKA Fortune telling and Mind reading)**

Have you ever predicted the future without knowing what might happen (fortune telling)? You may have had thoughts like “I’m going to get fired,” “My spouse is going to divorce me/my girlfriend is going to break up with me,” “I’m going to have a heart attack,” or anticipated any number of other (usually dire) future outcomes. Has your fortune telling ever developed into a “what-if spiral” in which one “what if” leads to another and another in a seemingly endless cycle?

For example, we might have thoughts that progress something like this: “I’m not going to be able to finish this project tonight”—“If I don’t finish this project tonight, I’m going to get fired”—“If I get fired, I won’t be able to find a new job”—“If I can’t find a new job, I’ll go broke and I won’t be able to pay my loans”—“My spouse will leave me”—“I’ll lose my house”—“I’ll become homeless”—“My life will be over.” Our minds can go down this chain without our awareness, so that the thought of “I’m not going to finish this project tonight” is met with extreme anxiety and dread because “I’m not going to finish this project tonight” now essentially means “I’ll become homeless and my life will be over.”

Have you ever imagined that you knew what someone else was thinking ([mind reading](#))? “So-and-so hates me,” “my boss thinks I’m doing a terrible job,” or “my friends don’t want to tell me what they really think of me.” Maybe your conclusions have proven correct at times. But our thoughts can sometimes tend toward the extreme, particularly when we are anxious, depressed, or feeling other strong emotions.

### **Catastrophizing**

Catastrophizing can go hand-in-hand with jumping to conclusions. Sometimes when we’re fortunetelling or predicting possible outcomes, we predict that the outcome will be so terrible that we won’t be able to manage—e.g., that the results will be catastrophic. For instance, in the example above, several of the thoughts including “my life will be over” could be considered catastrophizing thoughts. Other catastrophizing thoughts might be “I couldn’t handle it” or “It would be too much...” Albert Ellis, a pioneer of cognitive behavioral therapy coined the term “awfulizing” to refer to the same process. By framing something as inherently “awful” or “terrible,” rather than “difficult” or “unpleasant,” our negative emotion becomes amplified.

### **All-or-Nothing Thinking**

Have you ever had thoughts in which there are only two opposite options (e.g., “good” or “bad,” “intelligent” or “stupid,” “success” or “failure”) and nothing in between? You may have had thoughts like “If I don’t perform perfectly, then I have

failed." This type of thinking is also called black and white thinking. In reality, few situations are as clear-cut and black and white as our thoughts make them seem. There are many shades of gray between black and white.

### **Negative Filtering or Discounting the Positives**

This cognitive distortion involves filtering out important information: only taking into account negative evidence while minimizing positive evidence. Thoughts like, "sure, my professor gave me positive feedback on my presentation, but she was just trying to be nice," or "I noticed a couple people not paying attention because my talk was so boring" are instances of negative filtering.

With this thinking trap, it may seem as if we're walking around the world with an invisible bubble around us. Only evidence that is consistent with our beliefs gets into the bubble. If someone believes that they're unskilled and incompetent, they'll focus on evidence that confirms this belief and disregard or minimize evidence that demonstrates competence.

### **Overgeneralizing**

**Overgeneralizing** involves drawing broad conclusions based on limited information. Thoughts like, "She didn't want to go out with me. Women aren't interested in me and I'll always be rejected." Or you may have been late for an appointment and concluded, "I'm always late. I'm so irresponsible." With overgeneralizing, a single incident gets inflated into a perceived larger pattern that in actuality doesn't exist.

### **Should-ing**

"I shouldn't feel this way." "He shouldn't have done that." "She should have called me." How often do you notice "should" creeping into your thoughts and statements? We may get caught up in how we, others, or the world ought to be. It's easy to become mired in guilt and shame that we are different than we "should" be and angry that others aren't how they "should" be. But should-ing denies the reality that things are as they are. The more you struggle with and deny reality, the harder a time you're going to have dealing with challenges effectively.

### **Labeling**

We categorize and label as a way of making sense of our world, but we can sometimes turn this labeling impulse on ourselves and other people, applying one-word descriptions that exclude other information. "She's a jerk." "I'm an idiot." "He's a doormat." Usually, when we label, we use one trait or characteristic of a person to sum up their whole value as a person.

## Countering Cognitive Distortions

When we get caught in cognitive distortions, our thinking can become rigid and only allow for one way of looking at a situation or one possibility, like a horse with blinders on. There are usually many ways of interpreting a situation, and it's possible to develop your ability to think more flexibly over time, broadening your field of vision. When you are working on the skill of countering distortions, it's important to keep in mind that the goal is to work toward a more balanced and flexible way of thinking that allows for multiple possibilities. The goal is not to throw out your first set of thoughts and replace them with new, "positive" thoughts.

**Countering jumping to conclusions:** Your predictions about a situation are one possibility. What are other possibilities? How likely is each possibility, as a percentage from 0% likely (will never happen) to 100% likely (will certainly happen)? For example, say you notice a mole on your arm and think, "I probably have cancer." What are other possibilities? What is the best possible outcome? What is the worst possible outcome? How likely is it that you have cancer from 0-100%, and how likely are each of the other possibilities? What is the most likely outcome?

**Countering catastrophizing:** You may have come to the conclusion in the previous step that the outcomes you fear are not very likely. But what if they come to pass? Instead of stopping with "I won't be able to handle it if that happens," think about what you would actually do if your "worst-case scenario" came true. Have you ever been in situations that were similar in any way? How did you manage? Have you ever heard of someone being in this situation and recovering? How did they do it? What are the resources you could access?

**Countering all-or-nothing thinking:** Think of a spectrum with the black and white thoughts on each extreme (e.g., one end of the spectrum is "I'm a failure," and the other end is "I'm a success"). What lies in between the two poles? Can a person be successful in some ways but still "fail" in others? Remember, you don't need to throw out your original thought of "I'm a failure" and replace it with the opposite extreme ("I'm a success"). You are only trying to see the shades of gray in between black and white and recognize that there are additional possibilities.

**Countering negative filtering:** If you have been preferentially attending to negative evidence, seek out counterexamples in order to balance your view. For instance, if you hold the view that others do not like you, can you think of any opposing examples? Can you think of positive evidence that you may have discounted at the time? Have you ever interpreted friendly gestures as someone “just being nice” or “taking pity on” you? Is it possible those were examples of someone liking you or trying to befriend you? As you move forward, actively look for counter-evidence and try to notice when you discount the positives.

**Countering overgeneralization:** Recognize that one event or even a few instances do not necessarily suggest a pattern or larger truth. Focus on exceptions to the [overgeneralization](#). Are there times it’s not true? If so, it may be helpful to be more mindful of behavior that doesn’t fit into the overgeneralization.

**Countering should-ing:** Think about the rules you have for how you “should” be, how others “should” be, and how the world “should” be. What is the effect of believing in these rules and imposing them on yourself and others? Is it possible that others have different expectations or standards? If so, does that mean their standards are wrong? Why or why not? For example, perhaps you have had the experience of thinking “I shouldn’t feel this way” when you feel anxious. Why not? What is the effect of believing that you shouldn’t feel that way? What is the effect of thinking “it’s okay to feel this way sometimes”?

**Countering labeling:** Labels omit a lot of other information—think about the information that is excluded. For example, fill in the blank with a word that comes to mind when you are feeling unhappy: “I am such a \_\_\_\_\_!” What else are you? What does this label leave out about you? What would your favorite person say if asked what information has been left out?

Having added the skill of recognizing cognitive distortions to your cognitive restructuring repertoire, begin identifying distortions in your thought records. It’s best to identify any distortions right after identifying the automatic thoughts and before asking the probing questions from the last chapter. That way, it’s a little easier to come up with a powerful alternative response.

As with all the skills prior to this one, practice is very important. Complete one thought record daily identifying cognitive distortions and developing an alternative response. You’ll find that sometimes one thought seems to fit several cognitive distortions. That’s okay, you can either pick one distortion and restructure it, or you can restructure all of the distortions you find. What matters is that you’re thinking about the situation from a different perspective.

# Part 8: Opposite Action, Behavioral Activation, and Exposure

## Lasting Behavior Change

Early on in this workbook we mentioned that behavior can affect thoughts and feelings too. Well, here is where we outline some ways you can use behavior to change thoughts and feelings. You have learned some ways to guide your thoughts to more helpful directions. In this chapter we'll introduce you to some ways you can make your behavior work for you too.

## Opposite Action

Marsha Linehan, one of the foremost researchers in the area of treating emotional dysregulation, coined the term "opposite action," short for opposite-to-emotion action, to refer to a behavioral approach to modulating emotions. In a nutshell, opposite action is using a behavior opposite to your emotional urge to turn down the volume on your emotion.

Remember the CBT model? Well, just as thoughts and feelings have an effect on behavior, behavior can powerfully affect thoughts and feelings. Making significant behavior changes can also have a big effect on our emotions. By interrupting the pattern of mood-dependent behavior, you allow for new thoughts and feelings to arise.

This concept may run counter to your assumption about how to dissipate negative emotion. For a while it was thought that engaging in a lot of emotional expression would help dissipate intense emotions by providing a catharsis. For example, you may have heard that it would be helpful for an angry person to pummel a punching bag and "let out that anger" or "blow off steam," but modern psychology research has found that this activity actually increases the intensity of the emotion. The more you engage in an emotion-driven behavior, the more that behavior fuels your emotion. Fortunately, the opposite is true too. The more you engage in an opposite-to-emotion behavior, the less of the negative emotion you have.

### Steps for Opposite Action

**Step 1: When you have a strong emotion, check to see whether it's working for you or against you.** You may remember from earlier in the workbook that emotions, even unpleasant ones, can have beneficial functions. Fear alerts you to danger, anger inspires you to act, etc. Sometimes though, the emotion doesn't quite fit the situation or is unhelpful (for instance, anger when a friend tells you good news), or it is too intense to effectively function (as is the case with overwhelming panic). If it's not working for you, opposite action may be helpful.

**Step 2: Determine the urge associated with your emotion.** Every emotion carries with it an urge for us to act in some way. Here is a short breakdown of some of the urges associated with different emotions:

Anger: Aggressively engaging or attacking

Disgust: Avoiding or pushing away

Sadness: Withdrawing from activity and disengaging from people

Fear: Avoiding or escaping

Joy: Engaging with people and engaging in activity

**Step 3: Engage fully in the exact opposite behavior of the emotional urge** until you notice the emotion has significantly lessened in intensity. Here are some ideas:

Anger:

Take a short break from the source of anger.

Say something nice to someone, whether it's the person you're angry at or not.

Give your pillow a hug.

Let go of tension in your body.

Exercise.

Disgust:

Physically approach what you found disgusting and sit with it.

Mentally approach by seeing clearly the source of your disgust without avoiding.

Let go of physical tension.

Sadness:

Engage in pleasurable activities, even if you don't "feel like it."  
Connect with someone you care about.  
Get active with exercise.  
Engage in activities that help you feel the time was well spent.

Fear:

Physically approach what you found frightening and sit with it.  
Mentally approach by seeing clearly the source of your fear without avoiding.

Joy:

Focus on your breath to ground yourself in the present.  
Feel your body's heaviness while sitting still.

Opposite action works best when you persist in the behavior for several minutes straight. It will probably feel awkward and unnatural at first, but that's the point. After a few minutes you should start to notice your emotion ratcheting down somewhat. Just like all of the other skills, the more you practice, the better you get at it.

## Behavioral Activation

Behavioral activation is a CBT treatment for depression. It is like opposite action in that it works by engaging in the opposite of your mood-dependent behavior. Unlike opposite action, however, which is best for modulating momentary episodes of intense emotion, behavioral activation is designed to treat clinical depression. Clinical depression is feeling sad or depressed most days for at least several weeks consistently.

**Step 1: Track your behavior for one week.** Every day, jot down all of the activities you engage in throughout the day. You can do this in a calendar on your phone, a computer spreadsheet, or you can create your own paper version. Several times each day, log everything you did in the past few hours. As you do, rate your level of pleasure and mastery for each activity on a scale from 1 to 10. Pleasure refers to how much enjoyment you had, and mastery refers to a feeling of competence or engaging in something you felt was time well spent.

**Step 2: Identify and eliminate the energy drains in your day.** Energy drains are activities you engage in but provide no real purpose and do not add any additional pleasure or mastery. Once you identify them, eliminate them. Whatever you have to do to no longer engage in these wasted activities, do it. You might delete certain apps from your phone, block certain phone numbers, unplug your TV, etc. The point is to eliminate the things that take energy but don't provide anything in return.

**Step 3: Brainstorm a list of pleasurable and mastery-oriented activities.** As many as you can think of. Large projects and short diversions. Anything that might provide pleasure or mastery is acceptable for this list. If you've been feeling depressed for a long while, it might be difficult to create this list. One way of thinking about it is to remember what sorts of things brought you pleasure and mastery in the past. If you get stuck, take a look at the sample pleasure and mastery list below.

**Step 4: Schedule pleasure/mastery activities.** Looking at your calendar, choose one item from your list for each day, and schedule them in the coming week. It doesn't count if you don't put it in your calendar, and here's the reason: It is hard to do things that you don't want to do. That's why mood-dependent behavior comes so naturally, because it's easy. Behavioral activation has been researched extensively, and it is the treatment of choice for depression. But it won't work if you wait until you feel like it to engage in rewarding behavior. That's why scheduling is so important. It takes the in-the-moment choice out of the equation.

**Step 5: Engage in the scheduled activities.** Do each activity as it's scheduled. Just as in step one, track the pleasure and mastery you receive from each activity. At the end of the week, review your work and decide what activities to include in the following week.

Behavioral activation is not a complex psychological intervention, but it is difficult. We're actually working against biology when we engage in behavioral activation. And that's the whole point. One of the reasons you continue to be depressed is you continue to avoid rewarding behavior. The worse you feel, the less you want to engage in pleasure/mastery. The key is to stick with it even when you don't feel like it.

Another reason it can be difficult is that with depression, feeling better takes time. Little by little, week after week, the depression lessens. This means that it requires consistent effort over several months. That doesn't mean that it will take months before you start to feel better, but that it will take some time before your depression has completely lifted. Each week is slightly better than the previous week. Usually, people need between two and four months of behavioral activation

for a full course of treatment. And because it's best used with clinical depression, it's usually much more effective when you're engaging in behavioral activation while working with an experienced CBT therapist. There's just no substitute for getting weekly guidance and feedback from a trained professional.

## Exposure Treatment for Anxiety

Similar to opposite action, exposure therapy uses behavior to lessen intense feelings and cognitive distortions. Because we tend to avoid what we fear or are anxious about, our anxiety and fearful thoughts increase. If you are afraid of spiders, you avoid spiders. The longer you avoid them, the more your mind tells you frightening stories about them that don't accord with reality. Because you have been avoiding them consistently, you don't have any evidence against those fearful stories, so you believe them even more. Over time, just thinking about spiders might start to arouse feelings of panic, which feeds into the scary narrative your mind has been building up all this time. And the cycle continues.

Exposure interrupts this pattern by helping you approach things you had previously avoided. The more you approach the objects of your fear and anxiety, the more you get used to them. As you get used to them, your thoughts seem to restructure themselves. The less worrisome thoughts you have, the more confident you feel, and the easier it is to approach rather than avoid in the future. That is how exposure works. Again, it's not a complex process to understand, but it can be difficult. Just like behavioral activation, exposure has you do things that are unpleasant. Just as with all of the other CBT skills, practice is key.

### Steps for exposure:

**Step 1: Create a list of feared situations.** Write down as many anxiety-provoking situations you can think of. Most people find it helpful to limit the list to just one area of anxiety. For instance if you have a fear of heights and you get anxious in social situations, pick one, and create a list for and focus on that one area.

**Step 2: Arrange them from least anxiety provoking to most anxiety provoking,** creating an exposure hierarchy. As you do this you should have several items that are high-anxiety, some that are moderate-, and some that are low-anxiety. If one of these areas doesn't have any items, use your imagination to concoct a situation that fits.

**Step 3: Pick one of the items on the list, and write out a thought record for it.** Most people prefer to start with one of the lower-anxiety items, but some people prefer to start with a more challenging item. It's totally up to you. Once you pick an item you feel confident you can approach, create a thought record identifying all of the automatic thoughts that make the idea of this item anxiety-provoking. Then go through the steps from [parts six](#) and [seven](#) of this workbook to restructure those thoughts.

**Step 4: Plan your exposure sessions.** For exposure to work, each session needs to be at least a half hour, and you need to do it at least three or four times a week. For each session throughout the week, use the same exposure item. The point is to do the same thing so frequently that you get used to it by the end of the week.

**Step 5: Engage in the exposure repeatedly.** Right before you begin, review your completed thought record. Then spend a half hour or more approaching what you ordinarily avoid. Once you've done this four or five times, you should feel more comfortable with the trigger. If so, move on to the next item in your exposure hierarchy.

As with behavioral activation, if you feel your anxiety is very intense or significantly impacts your life negatively, you would likely benefit from working on exposure with a trained cognitive behavioral therapist. The form exposure takes can vary depending on the anxiety disorder, and only a trained CBT therapist can guide you through exposure when you have more severe anxiety. However, you can use the steps above to get a taste of what facing your fears is like using low-anxiety situations. Opposite action can also be effective with anxiety. Ordinarily, we interpret anxiety as a stop light, telling us we need to avoid whatever we are anxious about. However, opposite action can help you learn to approach those things instead. (Of course, you don't want to use this skill with things that are actually dangerous!)

Choose one of these behavioral skills to work on for several weeks while completing three to four thought records each week. As mentioned earlier, if you believe you have a more significant psychological problem or psychiatric order, consider beginning work with a cognitive behavioral therapist. You owe it to yourself to get the best level of care that you can. You can visit the links below to find a cognitive behavioral therapist in your area.

[CBT Online](#)

[Personal Family Counseling](#)