

COGNITIVE THERAPY:

A STEP-BY-STEP MANUAL

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I. What We Think Influences What We Feel

This section of reading will teach you how thoughts influence what we feel, what we do, and how our bodies physically respond. Our experience of being human can be conceptualized schematically as consisting of several basic components. These basic components include thoughts, feelings, behavior, and physiology that all serve to mutually influence each other in the overall context of environment. Thoughts are a particularly important part of emotional distress.

The psychotherapeutic process of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy teaches a variety of skills to manage emotional distress and then learning to apply these skills in situations of emotional distress by utilizing a flow-sheet decision chart to consistently accomplish four major goals:

Goal # 1. Identify the key thoughts (Hot Thoughts) that create emotional distress.

Goal # 2. Determine whether or not the identified key thoughts are accurate. If the key thoughts are determined to be inaccurate, making them more accurate will produce immediate emotional relief.

Goal # 3. If the key thoughts are determined to be accurate, then problem solving will produce emotional relief.

Goal # 4. If the key thoughts are accurate but there is no solution, than accepting this distress and refocusing attention to other areas that can be improved upon will keep the distress in perspective and, as such, will decrease emotional distress.

In summary, Cognitive Therapy is individually designed to provide you with the capability of consistently accomplishing goals one through four in the management of your unique distressing circumstances. When this is accomplished, you will have made significant steps toward obtaining happiness. Examples illustrating this process are discussed below.

Addressing Goal # 1.: Identify the key thoughts that create emotional distress.

We will argue the assumption that feelings usually do not occur without the presence of thoughts. Most events that occur in our lives are neutral until we assign meaning in accordance with our interpretations or appraisals of the event. To illustrate this concept, let's consider the following vignette where several people observe a couple arguing in a crowded restaurant. The argument ends with the woman exclaiming, "I won't stand for this." She gets up abruptly and storms out of the room.

Several observers of this argument felt several distinctly different emotions in response to this event. One recently divorced middle-aged man reacted with a feeling of depression, a young teenager with anger, a young professional woman with joy, and a sage old person with no particular emotion. How could all of these people have witnessed exactly the same event yet end up experiencing such different emotions? Well, as we will see, it all depended on what they were thinking or how they interpreted the argument.

The recently divorced man was reminded of how lonely and miserable he felt immediately following the divorce. The teenager thought of his sister who was always “overreacting” and concluded this woman was probably a “pain” just like her. The young professional woman is a psychologist who teaches women to be more assertive and thought “I wish I could get more of my women to stand up like that.” And finally the sage old person realized that these things happen in life and made a decision not to let it interrupt the harmony of dinner. So, what each person felt depended on how they interpreted the situation.

We should clarify that our goal is not to make you live your life without emotion like robots. Rather, the goal is to help you live life more comfortably without wasting energy on emotions that may be based on distorted or inaccurate thinking. The first step is to become more aware of how your thoughts are connected with your feelings. To do this, over the next week keep track of what thoughts or images are in your mind at the time of a particularly strong emotion. Use the two-column technique to accomplish this (see Diagram 8).

When doing this exercise, often the first thought or image you write down may not be what is responsible for producing the emotion in question, at the level of intensity that you experience it. There is usually an underlying belief or assumption that empowers the thought. How do you uncover these beliefs that David Burns calls “Hot Thoughts? You do this by asking two basic questions (depicted by the downward arrows in Diagram 8). What does that thought mean to me?” Or, “What is upsetting about that?” As depicted in Diagram 8, you may have to ask yourself these questions several times before you get to the “Hot thought.” You will know when you get to a hot thought if it is obvious that most people would feel the intensity of emotions you experienced if they truly believed the particular thought. Don’t assume the first thought you write down is the “Hot Thought.” Play “Columbo” and assume the role of a naive detective and always ask yourself the questions depicted by the downward arrow in Diagram 8.

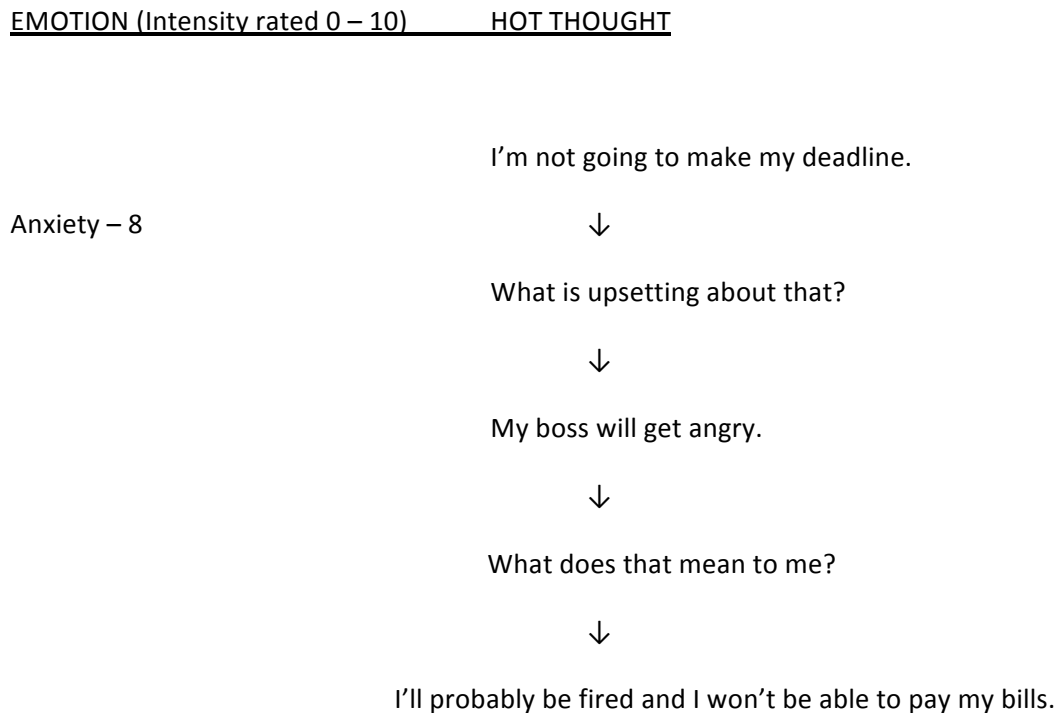
Addressing Goal # 2.: Determine whether or not the identified key thoughts are accurate. ***If the key thoughts are determined to be inaccurate, making them more accurate will produce immediate emotional relief.***

When you get to the “Hot Thoughts,” the next step will be to question the validity of that thought, belief, or assumption. If you determine that indeed that thought is inaccurate in some way, ask yourself what is a more accurate thought? What are other ways I can view that, which are perhaps less upsetting and more constructive and, most importantly, more accurate? This process should not be confused with “positive thinking” procedures which merely attempts to supplant negative thoughts with positive ones. The problem with this is that merely reciting more positive thoughts may not be believable, and therefore will be powerless. Furthermore, many positive thoughts may not be accurate and this, in fact, is why they are often not believable. For example, the saying “Each and every day will be better each and every way” is obviously not accurate when you are experiencing distress and therefore is not very believable.

In those instances when you can readily see how your upsetting thoughts are inaccurate and you are able to make them more accurate, you will often notice an improvement in feeling. However,

uncovering hot thoughts, critically appraising their validity, and making inaccurate thoughts more accurate can often be quite complicated and requires guided practice, which you will be receiving in the near future. The goal of the first week’s assignment in therapy is simply to provide you with the experience of seeing how your thoughts are connected with your feelings and to begin to uncover some of the beliefs or assumptions that empower them (see Diagram 8.)

DIAGRAM 8



II. What we think may be inaccurate and therefore what we feel may be

based on inaccurate thoughts.

The first step in controlling mood is to establish the connection between thoughts and feelings. The second step is to identify the “Hot Thoughts” by asking yourself the following questions for each thought that you identify: “What is upsetting about that?” or “What does that mean to me” ? You will know when you’ve identified a hot thought by asking yourself the question: “If I interviewed 100 people who believed that thought, would the majority of them feel the emotion I did with the same intensity?” If the answer is yes, that means you identified the hot thought. If the answer is no, you have to keep digging.

Once you identify the Hot Thought, the next step is to determine whether or not it is accurate. To determine this, it is helpful to attempt to match the hot thought to one of the inaccurate thoughts listed in Table 1 (pg. 5-6). Once you identify how your thought is inaccurate, this will give you clues how to make it more accurate. This involves entertaining different thoughts or alternative views. In the case of anxiety, this will also often involve de-catastrophizing and problem solving.

Let's use the example we used on page 4 to illustrate these next steps of identifying inaccurate thoughts and replacing them with more accurate thoughts, which is depicted in Diagram 9 (pp. 7-8).

Table 1.

Common Cognitive Inaccuracies:

1. **All-Or-Nothing Thinking:** You see only the extremes such as all good or all bad and do not appreciate the fact that most things in life fall somewhere on a continuum. The problem with this type of thinking is that it will set you up for frustration, disappointment, or anger since this imposes unrealistic constraints on how most things in life happen.
2. **Over-generalization:** You make a sweeping conclusion based on one event or one small piece of evidence. (e.g. One negative event is interpreted as a never ending negative cycle.) This type of thinking is in operation when you use words involving an "absolute" quality, such as "all", "every", "none", "never", "always", "everybody", and "nobody".
3. **Labeling:** This is an extreme form of Over-generalization where you transform one negative event into a global quality. An example of this would be if you made one mistake and then called yourself stupid. Rather than limiting your judgment to the isolated incident (e.g. That wasn't very effective and I won't do that again) you generalize to a pervasive quality that doesn't leave you with much hope for change (e.g. "I'm stupid or " I'm a failure".)
4. **Jumping to Conclusions:**
 - a. **Mind reading:** You assume that you know what others are thinking, feeling, and why they behave as they do without checking out your assumptions with the persons involved.
 - b. **Catastrophizing:** This is a special case of "jumping to conclusions" where you automatically assume that the worst possible scenario will happen.
5. **Filtering:** This occurs when you view the world through a filter that only allows negative attributes to be seen. This leads to undesirable situations where you magnify or exaggerate

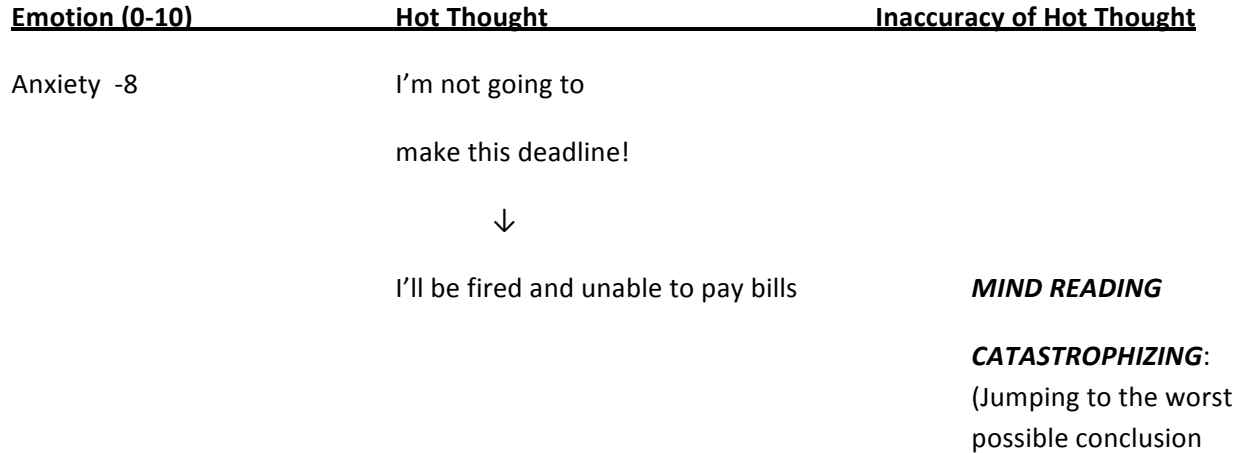
errors, fears, or imperfections and minimize or disqualify accomplishments and other positive qualities you indeed have.

6. **Personalization:** You assume inordinate responsibility for something that in fact is not totally your responsibility but rather is shared by others or influenced by circumstance. Assuming this inordinate responsibility usually leads to guilt.

7. **Should Statements:** You believe that there is a rigid set of rules about your own behavior of others. You attempt to motivate yourself with “shoulds” as if you have to prod yourself to get anything done or to punish yourself when something doesn’t get done. Should statements often lead to guilt or anger towards others.

8. **Emotional Reasoning:** You believe that because you feel something, therefore, it is true. (e.g. “I’m anxious so something must be really wrong” or “I feel stupid so therefore I am” or “I feel suspicious so therefore they must have done something wrong”.) In fact, this type of thinking is often reinforced by a “self-fulfilling prophecy” where a person’s reality is influenced by what they expect and how they act on these expectations.

DIAGRAM 9.



MORE ACCURATE THOUGHT

Once you have determined how the thought is inaccurate the next step is to make it more accurate. An example of some possibly more accurate thoughts are discussed below.

- 1.) What is more likely to happen? My boss might be upset but not enough to fire me since there are plenty of other things he is pleased about.
- 2.) What are the things I can do to prevent this from happening? (e.g. problem solving.) I can talk with the boss and let him know I'm not going to make deadline. He could then problem-solve with me (e.g., prioritize my duties and postpone other things to accomplish this if it's that important, or get extra help).
- 3.) Decatastrophizing: What can I do even if this happened? Even if I were to be fired it certainly wouldn't be the last job I would be eligible for. I could collect unemployment while I searched for a job to cover my expenses. Decatastrophizing means that first you ask yourself "What is the worst thing that could happen?" Many of us do not have any problems with this and in fact, we may have a propensity to do this immediately. The problem is that you stop with the catastrophic image and you're left at best with a feeling of uneasiness or at worst a feeling of doom. The way out of this dilemma is to ask a few additional questions. First, ask yourself "Even if that happened, what could I do?" If you can find possible solutions to even the worst possible scenario, how do you think you'll feel? Also, don't forget to ask yourself "What is more likely to happen?" It doesn't make much sense to make yourself upset with low probability, worst possible scenarios when higher probability, less noxious outcomes are a better bet.

You might be getting the impression that we have the opinion that all negative emotions are due to inaccurate thinking. NOT AT ALL! However, it is important to question your thoughts. You have heard the expression "Don't believe everything you read." We're just asking you to not believe everything you think.

Addressing Goal # 3.: If the key thoughts are determined to be accurate, then problem solving will produce emotional relief.

Not all emotions are based on inaccurate thoughts. Sometimes we feel poignant emotion that is the result of an accurate perception of a problematic situation. In this case, distress serves a useful function because it's telling you that a problem needs to be solved. The first step is to ask yourself "What can I do about this?" The next section is devoted to handling this situation where you determine that your thoughts are accurate but upsetting. At this point you need to engage in problem solving.

Problem Solving:

The following steps are useful to follow when you determine that your thoughts accurately reflect a problem:

Step 1: Specify the Problem. Don't leave the problem vague or abstract.

Make it concrete (e.g., something you can measure).

Step 2: Break the problem into manageable components. If you leave a large problem undivided, it may seem overwhelming to you and discourage you from trying to do anything about it. Break the problem into small enough parts such that the first step has a high likelihood, in your mind, of success. The same rule applies to each remaining steps with each one bringing you a little closer to solving the specified problem(s).

Step 3: Generate solutions to each of the steps identified in Step 2. The most creative problem solving occurs when you generate as many solutions as possible without being critical with any of them initially, no matter how untenable they may seem. If you're critical with your ideas in the early stages of problem solving you cramp creativity. After you think you've exhausted all possible solutions consult with friends, family and colleagues to see if they can think of things you overlooked.

Step 4: Cost-Benefit Analyzes. After you have generated all possible solutions, you then have to estimate the consequences of each course of action and determine which solution will give you the most benefit with the least cost.

Step 5: Put your plan to action and monitor whether you are getting the intended results. If you aren't, repeat steps 1-5.

Addressing Goal # 4.: *If the key thoughts are accurate but there is no solution, than accepting this distress and refocusing attention to other areas that can be improved upon will keep the distress in perspective and, as such, will decrease emotional distress.*

What To Do With Problems That Just Do Not Have Solutions:

Admittedly there are problems in life that do not have solutions. If this is truly the case, the challenge at this point is acceptance. This is probably the hardest to learn because it involves coming to peace with your limitations. Our powers are not limitless and sometimes we need to remind ourselves of that. However, beware of cognitive inaccuracies that may accompany this challenge of acceptance (e.g., ***black-white thinking***: If I can't solve this, what's the use; ***over-generalization***: I'll never be happy again, etc.). The most cost-effective strategy at this point is to refocus your attention and energy on those things that are within your control. Let's face it, there is always plenty of those.

COMMON PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED WITH COGNITIVE THERAPY:

A.) What to do when you make your thoughts more accurate but your emotions don't change:

If you find that you went through the entire thought record process and identified your Hot Thought(s), matched it to a cognitive distortion, entertained alternative views that are more accurate, and you still feel the same intensity of whatever emotion you started with, several things may have gone wrong.

First, even though you may have successfully defused one Hot Thought, there may still be others connected with the emotion(s) in question that need to be identified and worked through in the same way. Go back and ask yourself: What is upsetting about that? or "What does the original thought or situation mean to me?"

Second, and perhaps most commonly, you may not really believe your "more accurate thought" (e.g., the "more accurate" thought you attempted to replace the Hot Thought with). You may have qualified your "more accurate" thought with a "yes but" statement that you believe more, thereby defusing the "more accurate thought" of its power. This is why mere positive thinking often does not prove to be effective. What you need to do at this point is to follow the same procedure with the disqualification as you would with any other thought.

In summary, if you identify your Hot Thoughts and determine that they are inaccurate, attempt to make them more accurate by the procedures previously outlined. If your emotion remains unchanged, ask yourself if you are qualifying the "more accurate thought". If so, work through the disqualification as you would any other thought. Also, make sure that there are not more than one Hot Thought associated with the emotion(s) in question. If all this fails, remember that sometimes your emotions may lag behind your thoughts, given the extensive experience you've had with beliefs you're trying to change. You simply may need more experience with your new beliefs before your emotions follow suit.

Also, remember that the goal is not to eliminate emotion(s), but rather to make them less intense, frequent and disruptive.

Please refer to Diagram 10 for an illustration of this procedure addressing “more accurate” thought’s that are disqualified with the thoughts we were last working with in Diagram 9 on pages 6-7.

Diagram 10.

Before reading this section, please refer back to Diagram 9 on page 7. In this case we will assume that the more accurate thought presented on these pages does not lead to a reduction in anxiety. Therefore we will look for a disqualification of the more accurate thought, which often comes in the form of a “Yes-But” statement. For example:

“Yes-but, what if I do all that and he still gets angry and fires me? I’ve certainly seen him get really mad before.” Note that this thought, if believed, essentially disqualifies the previous attempt at a more “accurate” thought and renders it powerless. It is therefore critical that the validity of this qualification be critically examined.

CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF “YES-BUT STATEMENT”

Some important questions to ask are as follows:

- 1.) What is the evidence that supports the validity of this thought?
- 2.) What is the probability that the thought is true? (e.g. Are you catastrophizing by entertaining the worst possible scenario when less catastrophic outcomes are much more likely?)
- 3.) What does ruminating about this disturbing thought buy you? (It really only produces unproductive anxiety, that makes you uncomfortable.) Since you are jumping to conclusions in the sense that you are making a catastrophic prediction, wouldn’t it be best to test out your fears by discussing the situation with your boss before any more time is wasted?

An experiment could be conducted where you write down what you predict and then document what actually happens. If you consistently obtain results that are much less catastrophic than your predictions, what do you think that will do to your tendency to make that cognitive error in the future? It is important to note that in this example the only way to effectively dispute the catastrophic thought is to test it out. In this way anxiety can be used constructively.

Finally, keep in mind that you have probably “owned” your Hot Thoughts and the beliefs underlying them for a lifetime without any systematic questioning or critical appraisal. This is like trying to change beliefs in a “Courtroom of Biased Experience” where the jury (your beliefs) have been biased by a lifetime of hearing a one-sided story. Now, despite the fact that a defense attorney (your utilization of cognitive therapy) is beginning to present conflicting evidence, the jury is not entirely convinced because of the relatively brief time spent with this new evidence (in contrast to a lifetime spent with the other evidence).

Attempting to change beliefs at this early stage is also analogous to an artist starting a new painting. Each thought that is critically appraised and empirically tested is much like a “stroke on a new canvas”, where you are attempting to “paint a clearer picture”. In the beginning the strokes do not look like much, but in time when they are all put together a more beautiful picture can emerge.

Changing beliefs are as hard as changing habits. It takes time and experience. The best way to change a belief is to allow yourself the opportunity to think about things in other ways than you are accustomed. Most importantly, it will be important to test out some of the assumptions that you’ve been holding onto over the years. These exercises have attempted to provide you with a start.

In summary, the psychotherapeutic process of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy teaches a variety of skills to manage emotional distress in problematic situations by utilizing a flow-sheet decision chart to consistently accomplish four major goals:

1.) Identify the key thoughts that create emotional distress. 2.) Determine whether or not the identified key thoughts are accurate. If the key thoughts are determined to be inaccurate, making them more accurate will produce immediate emotional relief. 3.) If the key thoughts are determined to be accurate, then problem solving will produce emotional relief. 4.) If the key thoughts are accurate but there is no solution, than accepting this distress and refocusing attention to other areas that can be improved upon will keep the distress in perspective and, as such, will decrease emotional distress.

Cognitive Therapy is individually designed to provide you with the capability of consistently accomplishing goals one through four above, to effectively manage your uniquely distressing circumstances. When this is accomplished, you will have made significant steps toward obtaining happiness.