

Identifying and Changing Unhelpful Thoughts

We can contribute to our Anxiety by the way we think and type of thoughts we have. Although we cannot always control what we think we can decide what to do with these thoughts, we do not have to accept them. If these thoughts are negative or unhelpful we can challenge them. There are many types of unhelpful thoughts and recognising them is the first step towards changing them. Below are some common ways of thinking, read through them and see whether you recognise any.

All or Nothing

This refers to black and white thinking where you only accept perfection as success and anything less is failure. If you set a goal you only value total achievement of this goal. If you achieve 90% of your goal you still view it as failure, valuing 90% as 0%. This can lead to low self-esteem and giving up on goals. Examples are:

- Getting a B on an essay and feeling disappointed and a failure for not getting an A, ignoring all the good work you have done to achieve a B.
- Practicing Grounding to cope with flashbacks but after having a bad flashback believing you're not good at grounding and will never feel better despite all the other times you've managed to use Grounding effectively.

Catastrophising

This refers to thinking the worst of a situation without there being any evidence to back up this thought. Examples are:

- Thinking someone has been in a traffic accident because they are ten minutes late.
- Worrying someone will never speak to you again and will call you a liar when you open up to them.

Fortune Telling

We can spend time thinking about how things may go wrong rather than seeing what happens and dealing with the consequences if they come. We may think this is because we want to be prepared but if we spend a lot of time worrying about the possibility of something going wrong then we may be making ourselves unnecessarily anxious. Especially when most of our predictions do not occur. Examples are:

- Expecting to perform badly on an exam.
- Expecting a loved one to hate you and not believe you if you tell them that you are a survivor.

Labelling

Labelling refers to attributing a behaviour to your whole self and giving yourself (and others) a negative label. This may contribute to low self-esteem. Examples:

- Failing a test and thinking of yourself as a failure.
- Being overpowered physically and believing you are weak and pathetic.

Mind Reading

Making assumptions about other people's thoughts and beliefs without evidence to support this. Examples are:

- Believing people are laughing at you.
- Believing your partner thinks you're unattractive.

Negative Filtering

Anxious people can often ignore all the positives of a situation and only focus on the negatives, leading them to believe the worst of situations or themselves.

- Focusing on the question you got wrong on a test rather than all the questions you got right and thinking you are stupid or being frustrated with yourself.
- Going to an event alone despite being nervous, panicking and having to use grounding techniques. Believing this makes you a failure because you had a panic attack and ignoring the bravery of putting yourself in an uncomfortable position and success of using grounding techniques.

Over Generalising

We can make assumptions based on one negative experience that all future similar experiences will be the same despite this being statistically unlikely. For example:

- Not getting a job after a job interview leading you to believe that you will never get a job.
- Having a panic attack at the cinema and believing every time you go to the cinema you'll have a panic attack.

Should Statements

Having beliefs about how things "should be" and putting pressure on yourself. Examples:

- I should have got a higher mark for that exam.
- I should not be anxious about going to a party.

“What If?” Statements

You constantly imagine bad scenarios or something going wrong. Sometimes this may stop you doing something you might enjoy. Examples:

- What if I can't find any parking?
- What if people don't believe me?

Use the following exercises to help you identify the types of thoughts you have and change your way of thinking. Some of these exercise may be better suited to certain styles of thinking and you may find some more useful than others. This resource is intended as a guide and you can amend exercises to suit you and use focus on the ones you find most helpful.

Exercise 1

Write down any thought you have that you think may be unhelpful. Sometimes writing the thought down can give us some perspective and help us to identify the flaws of this way of thinking.

My Unhelpful/Negative Thoughts:

1. Can you identify it as any of the type of thoughts above? It may be more than one type of thought.

All or Nothing

Catastrophising

Fortune Telling

Labelling

Mind Reading

Negative Filtering

Over Generalising

Should Statement

What If?

Exercise 2: Changing a Negative into a Positive

Best for: Any thinking styles.

Choose one of your unhelpful thoughts and write down the benefits and negatives of this thought. How does it affect your mood, beliefs, behaviour?

Benefits	Negatives

What is the evidence for and against this thought or belief? Write any evidence you can think of.

Evidence For	Evidence Against

Use the previous tables to argue that this thought isn't true. Argue the opposite thought.

My unhelpful thought is not true because...

The Opposite thought is:

It is true because...

Exercise 3: Past Evidence

Best for: All thinking styles.

Choose one of your thoughts from Exercise 1. Can you identify a time that you've had the same or similar type of thought? For example, "I didn't get this job so I won't ever get a job." Is similar to when I thought I'd fail all my exams when I got a test wrong, or when I thought I wouldn't get into any college when I didn't get into one.

List your similar thoughts.

Similar Thoughts:

Think about these similar thoughts. How did they turn out?

For example, I thought I'd fail all my exams but I didn't, I actually did quite well. I didn't think I'd get into college but I did.

Draw a smiley face next to the thoughts you have written that turned out okay, or had a positive outcome.

From the similar thoughts you have written, can you identify thoughts where the conclusions you came to at the time weren't true? For example, I thought I'd fail all my exams, I did not.

Highlight or circle these thoughts.

Examine your previous thoughts focussing on which ones weren't true and which had positive outcomes. What does this suggest to you about your current negative thoughts?

Exercise 4: Be a friend

Best for: All thinking styles.

Choose a thought from step 1. Imagine a friend had this thought, what would you say to them?

I'd tell my friend...

What would your friend say to you if you told them you were having this thought?

My friend would say...

Exercise 5: Consequences

Best for: Catastrophising, Fortune Telling, Mind Reading, Over Generalising, "What If" Statements

Choose a thought from Exercise 1. What are the consequences of this thought? Sometimes when we start to think about outcomes we can move past worrying and realise that we will be able to handle the outcome of situations.

Try asking yourself "Will this matter or upset me in 5 years' time?" What about in 6 months' time, one month's or 2 weeks' time?

For example, if I fail the exam I can resit or appeal the result based on my past performance.

Write down the short term and long term consequences of your worry becoming true.

Consequences of My Thought(s):

Exercise 7: Alternative Explanations

Best for Catastrophising & Fortune Telling.

When you find yourself making negative predictions think about what would have to happen in order for this prediction to come true and what evidence you have for and against this.

For example: "Jane is late, perhaps she's been in a traffic accident". "In order for this to happen there would have to have been an accident due to weather, human error or a sudden hazard on the road." "I have no evidence for any of these things, however I know that Jane is often late to meeting me. I know that the road she has to come on is often congested. Jane's car broke down two weeks ago, she may be having car trouble"

My negative/unhelpful thought is:

The following would have to happen for this to be true:

-
-
-
-
-
-

Alternative Explanations are:

-
-
-
-
-
-

Exercise 8: Describe the behaviour

Best for: labelling

When you have a labelling type of thought try to objectively describe and explain the behaviour the thought is about.

For example, if the thought is “I failed a test, I’m a failure.” Instead recognise that this was one test that you failed and that doesn’t mean that you are failure. Think of successes you have to prove it. “I failed a test. I failed because I have had a lot to do and didn’t put as much time into studying as I should have. I have passed other tests. I failed this test but I am not a failure. I will study harder and get better at this subject because I can pass the next test.”

My negative/unhelpful thought is:

I have this thought because...

Reasons my negative thought is not true:

My new positive thought is:

Remember that you can visit www.rapecrisis.org.uk to access confidential online support and find details of your local Rape Crisis Centre. Alternatively you can call the national Rape Crisis helpline (run by our member centre Rape Crisis South London) on **0808 802 9999** between 12 noon – 2:30 pm and 7 – 9:30 every day of the year for confidential support and/or information about your nearest service.