



HOW TO CHANGE NEGATIVE THINKING

“For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2, 239–251.

Although you may not be fully aware of it, our minds are always ‘on the go’ throughout the day. Our minds are constantly experiencing events, labeling objects, thinking about what to make for dinner, about planning a trip and so forth. The amount of things we think about through out the day is limitless.

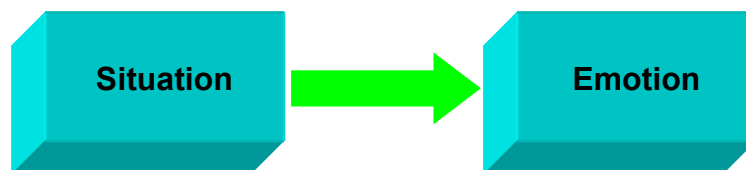


Hint: Take a moment right now and stop yourself during the day and ask yourself, “What was I just thinking about?” Trace your thoughts back in time. Chances are you’ll be aware that you were thinking of all sorts of things. Our minds are always in motion!

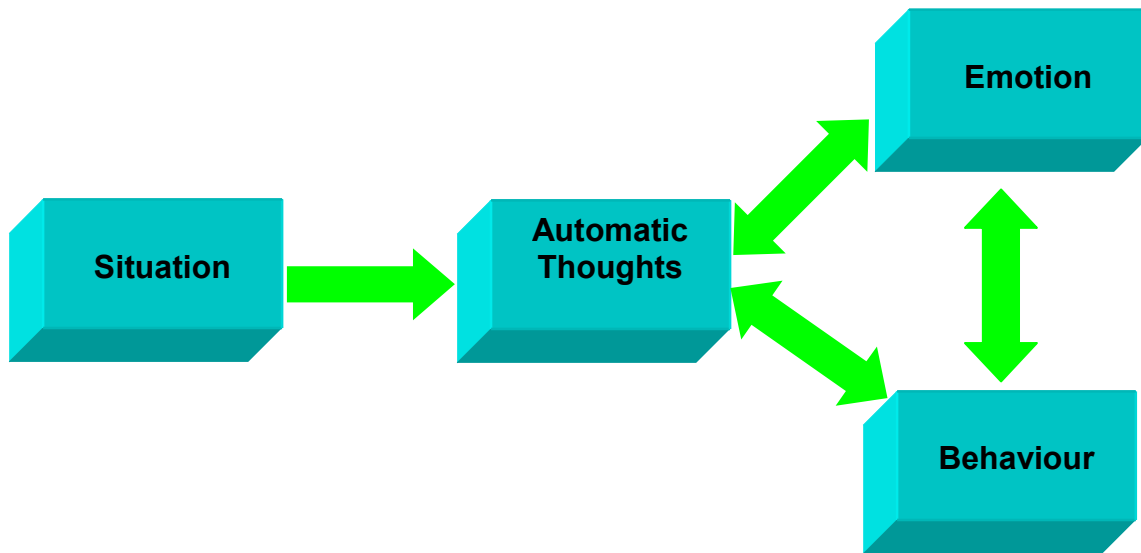
Although we all experience moments of negative thinking, if you are constantly experiencing anxiety, depression or anger that is affecting the quality of your life, chances are you are engaging in an excessive amount of negative thinking. For example, if you are anxious more often than not, you may fear being fired from your job if you are late. If caught in a traffic jam you may feel like suffocating and unable to escape. When listening to the news on TV, you may perceive that the world is full of horrible catastrophes and wars. In contrast, if you are feeling depressed, you may perceive rejection if a friend calls to cancel an outing with you. You may feel like the world is against because the weather is rainy and you cannot go hiking. You may believe that you will never get that promotion at work.

COGNITIVE THERAPY: HOW WHAT WE THINK LEADS TO OUR EMOTIONS

Do situations cause our emotions? It is probably safe to say that the majority of people believe that emotions are the direct result of the events that we experience as shown in the model below.



However, one of the most powerful and revolutionary advances in psychology was the discovery of the effect that thoughts, beliefs and perceptions have on our emotions. Thus, the model above is only partially correct. So although a situation may have some bearing on how we feel, by far the biggest effect comes from our interpretation of the event, that is the thoughts, beliefs and perceptions that go through our minds about the situation. This breakthrough was extremely exciting to psychologists, as we could now give hope to people suffering from psychological problems. Through scientific research studies, psychologists now had an added tool in which to help people. Here is the complete Cognitive Therapy (CT) model for how thoughts influence emotions and our behaviour. If you have read the toolkit on What Is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, you may notice that the link between thoughts, behaviours and emotions is repeated here.



If this model is not completely clear, let's go through an example. Let's say you are waiting for a friend to meet you for the movies at 6:00pm. It's now 6:30pm and they still have not shown up. The table below demonstrates how different thoughts can lead to different emotions while the situation remains the same.

Situation	Automatic Thought	Emotion
1. A friend is late for the movies.	I hope he's all right and nothing happened.	anxiety.
2. A friend is late for the movies.	He's always late!!	anger or frustration.
3. A friend is late for the movies.	I guess he doesn't like me and doesn't want to be my friend.	sad or depressed.

Now let's test you! Here is another example for you to complete. The answers are found just after the table.

Situation	Automatic Thought	Emotion
1. You had an argument with your boss.	How dare he speak to me like that!	
2. You had an argument with your boss.	He doesn't like me.	
3. You had an argument with your boss.	I'm going to be fired!	

Answers: 1) anger or frustration; 2) sad or depressed; 3) anxiety.

You may have noticed in the model above that thoughts are labeled as 'automatic thoughts'. Before showing you how to change your negative thinking, it is really important to understand what is meant by automatic thoughts. Automatic thoughts can be thoughts, mental images or pictures, memories or even physical sensations that go through our minds. Psychologists call them 'automatic' because they pass quickly through our minds and we are not totally aware of them. A good analogy is that they are like reflexes that occur quickly and spontaneously to an event.



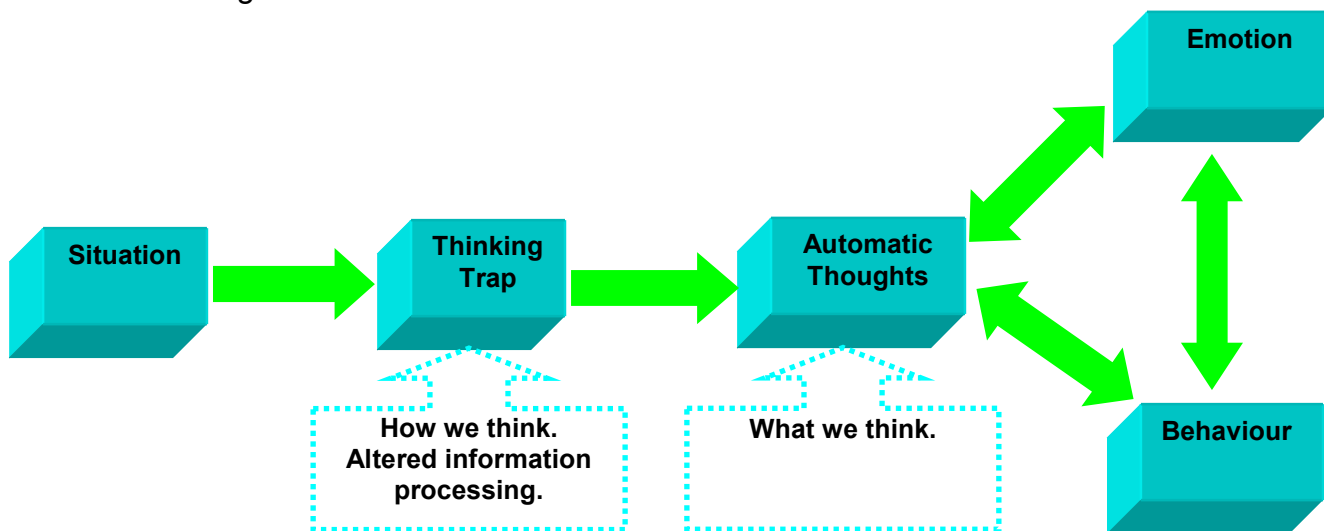
A useful example: Automatic thoughts are critical to changing negative thinking but can be a difficult concept to grasp. Let's see if this example can help. Automatic thoughts develop from repeated experiences. For example, if someone were constantly criticized by their parents, they might have the thought "I can't do anything right" every time they made even the slightest mistake. This could develop into an automatic thought every time they are faced with a similar situation because repeated experiences have led to the same result, that of being criticized. The thought also becomes automatic because our minds can only hold so much information at a time. Our mind develops patterns or short cuts to interpret our individual reality that become automatic reactions to events. In the case of automatic thoughts, we are not fully aware of them, just the associated emotion. Automatic thoughts can be compared to driving a car. When driving, do you tell yourself how much pressure you need to apply to the accelerator or how much force you need to apply to the steering wheel to turn the wheel so many degrees? Of course not! You've done it so many times that it has become automatic and you are not aware of the numerous calculations and judgments you are making every second while driving. Likewise, when talking, we don't think about the shapes we make with our lips or the amount of air we push out our mouths to make syllables. Automatic thoughts are similar to these examples, quick and automatic!



For your information: The term 'automatic thought' was coined by the father of cognitive therapy Aaron Beck. Albert Ellis used a similar term called 'self-talk.' Psychologists will also use the term 'internal dialogue' as well.

COGNITIVE ERRORS AND FALLING INTO THINKING TRAPS

Psychologists have found that we frequently fall into what are called 'cognitive errors' or 'cognitive traps'. Studies have shown us that unpleasant emotions such as anxiety, sadness and anger colour or affect how we perceive the world by filtering out disconfirming evidence against our automatic thoughts. In fact, once you get used to changing your negative thinking, you will probably notice that you were not very objective in how you perceived a situation. Thus, unpleasant emotions filter out disconfirming evidence against our automatic thoughts, which keeps us from being objective. So if you are anxious most of the time as an example, chances are you are falling into thinking traps, which are preventing you from seeing things realistically and objectively. This makes sense from an evolutionary point of view. Imagine if you were crossing the street and a car ran a red light and came towards you. Your attention would be completely focused on getting out of the way so that you do not get seriously hurt or killed. However, imagine if your attention wandered and you started to look at the other cars or buildings around you, precious seconds would be wasted preventing you from getting out of the way. Serious injury would likely be the result of your mind wandering away from the danger of the car. So our mind focusing on the danger has a real purpose. However, if we don't catch this process during our every day life, chances are we will see danger everywhere and end up feeling anxious all of the time. In the next section, we will focus on changing negative thinking by breaking out of these thinking traps. Click [here](#) for a list of common Thinking Traps. The following model, which just expands on the CT model above, includes the link with thinking traps. So thinking traps are 'how we think' about a situation, which results in 'what we think' or automatic thoughts. The end result is an associated emotion and behaviour.





For your information: Research studies have demonstrated that if asked to remember words from a list containing both positive and negative words, clinically depressed patients will remember mainly negative words compared to non-depressed people. However, if non-depressed people are then made to feel sad or down, they will then also tend to remember more negative words. This research demonstrates that feelings of depression will make us focus on the negative and filter out the positive.

HOW TO CHANGE NEGATIVE THINKING

Now let's get started on changing your negative thinking. In CBT, the goal is not to change our thinking so that everything is rosy and all positive. The goal is to be as realistic and objective as possible. Sometimes life is tough. Chances are you will not be fooled by changing your thinking if you are facing real-life problems. For example, if someone close to you has passed it away, it is normal to feel sad or even quite down about it for some time. So in fact, if there is a real problem affecting how we feel, we do not want to sweep it under the rug. We want to know about it so that it can be resolved. Having said that, let's get started.



For your information: Psychologists call the process of changing negative thinking 'reappraising' or 'cognitive restructuring'.



A useful example: As previously mentioned, changing negative thinking is called re-appraising or cognitive restructuring. This process is similar to pressing play after fast-forwarding a movie on a DVD player. When the movie is on fast-forward, the images fly by quickly and it is hard to make sense of things. This is similar to the stream of automatic thoughts that quickly pass through our minds. However, when you then press play and the movie slows down, we can make sense of what is going on. Similarly, when you use a thought record to change your negative thinking, it is like pressing play in your mind. Thoughts slow down and you can make sense of how your perception is affecting how you feel.

1. Pay attention to your self-talk. Remember that self-talk is your inner dialogue, the things you say to yourself after a situation, the automatic thoughts and beliefs that lead to the emotion(s) you experience. Anytime you notice that you are experiencing an unpleasant emotion, stop and ask yourself what you were just thinking about.

Here are some examples:

- I'm a loser, an idiot, a failure.
- I'll never be able to do it.
- I'm losing control.
- I feel like dying.
- People always put me down.
- He/she doesn't care or love me.
- They'll laugh at me.

2. Pick out the thought(s) that really make you feel the emotion the most.

Consider this the hot thought(s). Here's an example. You get into an argument with your boss and you feel anxious. Here are the thoughts that could go through your mind:

- He's so stupid.
- I'm going to get fired.
- I wish I could tell him off.

Which of these is the hot thought, the thought that would likely make you feel most anxious? Most likely the fear of getting fired.

3. Challenge the negative thought(s). Write down the evidence for and against the hot thought(s). Can you see the situation differently? Remember that we all make cognitive errors or fall into thinking traps sometimes. It might be helpful to identify which one you have made. Look at all the evidence. What is the balanced or realistic way of looking at things?



Hint: Changing negative thinking can be very challenging. Use the Thought Record Worksheet and example under the Handouts & Worksheets section to help you out.



Hint: If you have a hard time thinking realistically, consider writing down your challenges to your negative thoughts on a cue card. Carry the card with you and use it if you are having a hard time challenging your negative thoughts.

4. Now rate how you feel. Did the emotion decrease in intensity? Did any other positive emotion come, such as relief, as a result of changing your negative thinking?



Hint: Here are some final tips to help you out.

2. Practice makes perfect. So practice! practice! practice!
3. Remember that automatic thoughts are like reflexes. Don't worry about what your automatic thoughts are. Give yourself a 'free pass' on them. What is important is what you do afterwards with your negative thoughts now that you are aware of them.
4. When you look at the alternative or balanced way of seeing things, don't worry if your emotion does not go down to 0%. If you see a decrease, it probably means you are being more objective.
5. Remember that the goal is to be as realistic and objective as possible.
6. Automatic thoughts are not necessarily truths. Nor does it mean that they will come true.
7. If you find it useful, label your common thinking traps. Do you make certain ones most of the time? Keep these in mind.
8. Some automatic thoughts are positive. When changing our automatic thoughts we want to focus on the negative ones, specifically the hot thought(s).