



UNTWIST YOUR THINKING

What comes first: thoughts or feelings? Though you may not be aware of it, distortions in your thinking may be causing your negative feelings, but learning to challenge those thoughts can provide great relief.

WORDS / REBECCA HOWDEN

Imagine you are walking down the street and you see somebody you know but they don't acknowledge you. How would you feel? It might make you confused or angry or sad. You might feel a sense of shame. For some people, that feeling of rejection could hang around all day like a gloomy cloud over their heads. For others, it might not bother them at all. Why does one person respond so

differently from someone else in the same situation? Cognitive behavioural therapy teaches that situations don't cause feelings: it's thoughts that lead to feelings. Associate Professor Michael Baigent, a Beyond Blue board member and clinical director at the Centre for Anxiety and Related Disorders at the Flinders Medical Centre in South Australia, explains that often these thoughts are automatic and we

may not even be fully aware of them as they are running through our heads. "The reason for the difference in those feelings is the thoughts that automatically pop into your head," says Baigent. "These thoughts will differ from person to person. And when you have a disorder like depression or anxiety, there are generally patterns of thinking that become habitual and recurrent; people often don't realise they're doing it."

In the situation described above, someone with habitual negative thought patterns might have thought something like, "That person must hate me, just like everybody else," without even being aware of the thought. Someone with social anxiety might have thought, "That person thinks I'm an idiot and doesn't want anything to do with me; if they looked at me they just would have laughed."

Cognitive behavioural therapy is based on the understanding that these thoughts are created by cognitive distortions, or thinking errors. By challenging these negative and automatic thoughts, you can change the way you feel. CBT, as the therapy is commonly abbreviated, is often used as a treatment for mood disorders such as depression and anxiety, but its application can be helpful for anyone having difficulty with recurring negative thoughts and feelings, whether or not they have a mental disorder.

"CBT is one of the most researched psychological treatments there are, and one for which there is the most evidence of its effectiveness," Baigent says. "It relies on the model and understanding we have that there is a connection between the things that happen and our feelings — and that connection is mediated by the thought that arises."

10 TYPES OF TWISTED THINKING

One of the reasons this method is so effective is that, in most cases, the thoughts that cause your upsetting feelings are not only negative, they are also irrational. These are errors in your thinking, created by distorting mental filters that cause you to perceive reality in a negative light.

Dr David D Burns, a US psychiatrist, is one of the leading thinkers in cognitive distortions and CBT. In his highly influential book, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, he suggests 10 main categories of thinking errors. The first step to changing your thinking patterns is to recognise these distortions for what they are.

All-or-nothing thinking

This filter makes you see things in black and white categories, setting the basis for perfectionism. "If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure," Dr Burns explains. For example, an excellent student might get a B on an exam and conclude that they are stupid. When all-or-nothing thinking happens, we perceive

everything as either all good or all bad; we are brilliant or completely stupid, a success or an utter failure.

Untwist it: Nothing is ever really black and white. Ask yourself, "Is it really true that I am a complete failure because of one mistake?" Recognising this as an irrational way of thinking and allowing more room for shades of grey can provide relief from the anxiety and hopelessness you may be feeling.

Overgeneralisation

When you overgeneralise, Dr Burns explains, "You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat." Words like "always" and "never" are frequent in your thoughts; everything seems to be reflecting a rule. Your train gets cancelled and you might think, "Just my luck — this always happens to me."

Untwist it: When you examine how true that thought really is, chances are you'll find that, in fact, most of the times you've needed to catch a train there has been no problem.

Mental filter

Similarly, this filtering process causes you to give disproportionate attention to a negative detail in a situation and therefore perceive the whole situation to be completely negative. For example, you get feedback on a presentation at work that is 95 per cent positive but you focus exclusively on the small percentage of criticism and see yourself as having failed. By filtering out the positive aspects of an experience, Dr Burns says, "Your vision of reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that colours the entire beaker of water."

Untwist it: Look closely at the facts of the situation. If you had to pick out one positive aspect of it, could you? Chances are there is something you are overlooking.

Disqualifying the positive

Think of the way many of us have been conditioned to respond to compliments. Rather than accept praise or admiration from someone, you might think, "They're just being nice"; that maybe they're only saying it because they want something from you or perhaps they feel sorry for you. "You dismiss positive experiences by insisting they 'don't count' for some reason or other. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences," Dr Burns says.

Untwist it: Consider the evidence. What proof do you have that these positive things "don't count"? Do you have any real reason to dismiss them?

Jumping to conclusions

This thinking error comes into play when you make a negative assumption without any definite facts to support it. For example, if you text a friend and they don't respond, you might fall into the "mind reading" error and conclude that they are reacting negatively towards you when, really, nobody can ever know what someone else is thinking or feeling. Or you might want to ask someone out but you're already convinced you will be rejected. This is known as the "fortune teller" fallacy, another common way of jumping to conclusions. "You anticipate that things will turn out badly and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact," Dr Burns says. "It's as if you had a crystal ball that foretold only misery for you."

Untwist it: Remember that you don't have magical powers. You can't know for sure what someone else is thinking unless you ask them and you can't know for sure how something is going to turn out before it happens.

Magnification or minimisation

This is also called the "binocular trick", where you either exaggerate the importance of something way out of proportion or you shrink it down and dismiss it. We tend to magnify our fears, imperfections and mistakes so that an ordinary negative situation becomes a disaster. For example, if you make a mistake at work, it can seem like a catastrophe. On the other hand, when you look at your strengths and what you have achieved, you might minimise them so they seem tiny and unimportant.

Untwist it: How would you perceive these same faults or mistakes in somebody else? Is it really true that one error means your whole career is over?

Emotional reasoning

When we feel something strongly, we often incorrectly assume that our negative emotions must reflect the way things really are. "I feel it, therefore it must be true," says Dr Burns, summarising this kind of distorted thinking. You feel guilty, so you must have done something wrong. You feel overwhelmed, so your problems must be impossible to solve.

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Untwist it: What proof do you have other than your feelings? Challenging these perceptions will more often than not reveal an error in your assumptions.

“Should” statements

“I should work harder.” “I shouldn’t have eaten that chocolate.” “I shouldn’t have made that mistake.” “Should” statements are ways we talk to ourselves that emphasise expectations, rules and standards that are often rigid and unattainable. “You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn’ts, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything,” Dr Burns says. This way of thinking places a lot of unnecessary pressure on yourself and is a surefire way to produce guilt, frustration, disappointment and resentment.

Untwist it: Dr Burns suggests replacing “should” thoughts with more flexible and forgiving alternatives. Instead of telling yourself, “I should go to the gym,” for example, try reframing it as, “It would be good if I went to the gym.”

Labelling

Making a judgement about yourself or someone else as a person rather than seeing their behaviour as something the person did is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking or overgeneralisation. If you make a mistake at work and admonish yourself by saying “I’m so stupid” or “I’m such a loser”, you are assigning a highly emotive label to yourself that will likely lead to guilt and shame. “Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself,” Dr Burns says. In other words, you are describing a specific behaviour as if it defines you as an individual. Similarly, labelling someone else as a jerk or an idiot leaves little room for change and is likely to cause you more anger and frustration than conceding that their behaviour is what has upset you, not them as a person.

Untwist it: Focus on the event or behaviour as separate from the person. Does making a mistake really make a person stupid?

Personalisation

Personalisation occurs when you automatically assume responsibility and blame for something that is not entirely within your control. “You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event which, in fact, you were



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not primarily responsible for,” Dr Burns says. For example, if you play on a basketball team and you lose a game, you might feel responsible, when in reality, the success or failure of your entire team does not lie on your shoulders alone. Or maybe you planned a barbecue for a friend’s birthday and the weather unexpectedly turns, and you feel guilty even though there was no way you could have known.

Untwist it: Look for the evidence. Realistically, what could you have done to change the outcome? Is it reasonable to expect that of yourself?

CREATING CHANGE

If you recognise some of these thinking patterns in yourself, the great news is you’ve made the first step to changing them. When you look at your thoughts and feelings through a cognitive behavioural therapy lens, you can learn to identify these automatic thought patterns, slow them down and rebalance them in favour of healthier thinking.

“The idea is to identify what your thoughts are and eventually replace negative and automatic thoughts with a

THREE STEPS TO HEALTHIER THOUGHTS

Michael Baigent says learning to challenge your thoughts is a process that takes time and practice. Here’s how to set out on the right path.

1 Identify the distortion. The first step of all is to be aware of what you’re thinking. “This kind of approach requires you to keep a pen-and-paper record of it,” he says. “When there are strong emotional moments that you’ve noticed, write them down and try to identify the thinking distortion.”

2 Examine it. “Once you get good at recognising the thinking errors, the next step is learning how to alter those thoughts,” Baigent says. This involves examining how rational this way of thinking really is. Ask yourself: How true is this? What proof do I have? Is there anything I am overlooking? “It’s sort of like looking at the evidence for and against a thought, to see if it’s rational or not. Let’s test the theory like a scientist would.”

3 Replace it with a rational thought. When you have established that the negative thought is irrational, it’s time to work on replacing it with a healthier thought. “There is an important distinction to make here between a rational thought and a positive thought. It needs to be something that is believable and rational. Otherwise, you might be saying positive things to yourself but underneath you might still be dismissing them with more automatic thoughts.

“With practice you can work towards replacing the first automatic thought you had with a rational thought and over some time that automatic thought can start to change.”

rational thought,” Michael Baigent says. “You need to work at it and practise. If your brain has been automatically generating a range of negative thoughts, it takes practice to replace those thoughts with a rational one. But over time, you can train your brain so that rational thoughts become more automatic to you.”

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