

THE PEER MENTORS PRESENT

**SELF-TALK &
THINKING TRAPS**

A COPING STRATEGIES WORKSHOP

****DISCLAIMER****

If you are experiencing thoughts that are causing you extreme distress, anxiety, or fear, thoughts that are dangerous, or possible hallucinations, please reach out to a mental health professional.

These exercises are intended as coping strategies for daily life to help you with negative thought patterns, but do NOT replace professional support if you are having thoughts that are making you feel scared or unsafe.

WHAT IS SELF-TALK?

- ▶ “Self-talk” refers to our inner dialogue—how we talk to ourselves.
- ▶ Situations do not cause us to feel a particular way, the way we process and think about situations is what causes our feelings.
- ▶ What we say to ourselves (our self-talk) has the greatest degree of impact on our feelings and wellbeing.
- ▶ Our self-talk is largely responsible for creating our understanding of reality. This can seem overwhelming, but really it’s a good thing: we don’t always have control over the situations that happen to us, but we DO have a lot of control over how we think about them.

WHAT ARE THINKING TRAPS?

- ▶ Also sometimes referred to as cognitive distortions, or automatic negative thoughts (ANTS).
- ▶ These all refer to habitual patterns of thinking that are negatively biased, and often objectively inaccurate.
- ▶ “Cognition” refers to the experience of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, and “distortion” refers to twisting or altering something from its true state. So “cognitive distortions” happen when our understanding of things are not quite right, because our thoughts are reflecting an untrue view of reality.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

- ▶ Thinking traps are very common, and they tend to churn around in our minds without us ever realizing that the negative messages they produce are actually untrue, or heavily distorted versions of reality.
- ▶ For many of us the most difficult and dangerous part of negative self-talk is that our brains *really believe it*.
- ▶ By learning to monitor our self-talk and challenge cognitive distortions, we have an immense amount of power to change the way we feel about ourselves and our lives.
- ▶ Using positive coping strategies can help to make your self-talk more positive, more rational, more objective, and more compassionate.

THINKING TRAPS: THE BIG TEN

ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING

- ▶ You see things in black-or-white categories. If a situation falls short of perfect, you see it as a total failure.
- ▶ Example: You've decided to quit smoking. You slip up and have one cigarette a friend offers you. Seeing this as a complete failure, you buy and smoke an entire pack that weekend.

OVERGENERALIZATION

- ▶ You see a single negative event, such as a romantic rejection or career setback, as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using words such as “always,” “never” or “every” when you think about it.
- ▶ Example: You do poorly on one of your final papers. You believe that this is proof that you are unintelligent, hopeless at school, and will never succeed.

MENTAL FILTER

- ▶ You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively, so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like a drop of ink discolouring a glass of water.
- ▶ Example: You get lots of good feedback in your critique, however someone also had some critical comments. You obsess over the critical feedback for days, and ignore all the positive things other people said.

DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVE

- ▶ You reject positive experiences by insisting that they “don’t count.” If you do a good job, you may tell yourself that it wasn’t good enough, or that anyone could have done as well. Discounting the positive takes the joy out of life and makes you feel inadequate and unrewarded.
- ▶ Example: You get an A- on your paper, and instead of being pleased with your good mark, all you can think about is that your paper wasn’t good enough to get an A+.

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

- ▶ You interpret things negatively when there are no facts to support your conclusion. This can look like:
 - ▶ **Mind Reading:** Without checking it out, you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you.
 - ▶ Example: Your coworker is a bit quiet and distant at work. You immediately jump to the conclusion that they are mad at you.
 - ▶ **Fortune-telling:** You predict that things will turn out badly.
 - ▶ Example: Before a test you tell yourself "I'm *sure* that I'm going to fail."

MAGNIFICATION

- ▶ You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings, or you minimize the the importance of your desirable qualities.
- ▶ Example: You accidentally tip over some ink in the studio and it gets on a classmate's spare paper. Even though they assured you it wasn't a big deal and thanked you kindly for offering to replace it, you can't stop thinking what a horrible, clumsy person you are. You stew about it for days.

EMOTIONAL REASONING

- ▶ You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are.
- ▶ Example: You feel scared of flying on airplanes, and take this to mean that it really must be dangerous. You feel like a failure, so you assume this means that you really are failing. You feel angry, so you believe this proves you have been treated unfairly.

SHOULD & MUSTS

- ▶ You tell yourself that things *should* be a certain way, or that you *must* do certain things. "Should" statements that are directed against yourself lead to guilt and frustration. "Should" statements directed against others lead to anger and frustration.
- ▶ Example: After completing a difficult and challenging technical project, you tell yourself that you shouldn't have made so many mistakes. (Try rephrasing "shoulds" as "coulds" i.e. I *could* have done some things differently)

LABELING

- ▶ Labeling is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of seeing things as individual actions a person does, you see them as intrinsic qualities a person has. Labeling is irrational because what you *do* is not the same as who you *are*.
- ▶ Example: Instead of saying "I made a mistake" you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm such a screw-up." You see a problem with your whole self, rather than with an individual action.

PERSONALIZATION & BLAME

- ▶ **Personalization** occurs when you hold yourself personally responsible for an event that isn't entirely under your control.
- ▶ Example: Your parent says some really cruel things to you, you think to yourself "if only I got better marks at school, they wouldn't have to say these things."
- ▶ **Blame** is when you blame other people or circumstances for your problems and overlook the ways that you might be contributing.
- ▶ Example: You are having problems in your relationship and think to yourself "this is all my partner's fault, if they were just more considerate and a better listener everything would be fine."

REFRAMING DISTORTED THOUGHTS

John Grohol, Psy.D "10 Proven Methods for Fixing Cognitive Distortions." *Psych Central*. Updated Feb. 23, 2020.
<https://psychcentral.com/lib/fixing-cognitive-distortions/>

WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT?

- ▶ Using your list of cognitive distortions, begin monitoring your self-talk for distorted thoughts. Keep an eye out for recurring thoughts or patterns.
- ▶ Identifying the cognitive distortions you are experiencing is the first step. Notice the thought, and name it for what it is.
- ▶ The next step is to reframe your thoughts in a more objective way, and ideally a more positive and compassionate way. There are several strategies for going about this.

EXAMINE THE EVIDENCE

- ▶ This involves taking a step back and being intentional about trying to look at the facts of a situation as objectively as possible.
- ▶ You want to try your best to remove yourself from the emotional intensity of a situation—you can write down the thought and save it for later if you need to.
- ▶ Go through your thoughts connected to the situation and decide what is fact, and what is only an opinion, interpretation, or assumption. (You're basically being like a detective investigator for your thoughts—would any of this stand up in court?)

DOUBLE STANDARD METHOD

- ▶ Many of us have a double standard in that we are harder on ourselves than we would ever be to a friend in a similar situation.
- ▶ This method involves being intentional about talking to ourselves in the same compassionate and caring way that we would to a loved one.
- ▶ Say to yourself “what would I say to a friend who was feeling this way?”
- ▶ You would never tell a friend “You’re hopeless and you’re going to fail this exam”—so practice not saying that kind of stuff to yourself either!

THINKING IN SHADES OF GREY

- ▶ This method helps with all forms of black-and-white thinking, discounting the positive, magnification, etc.
- ▶ Instead of thinking about problems as 'either/or' try evaluating things on a scale from 0-100, allowing for shades of grey.
- ▶ Learn to evaluate things as partial successes, rather than complete failures.
- ▶ Acknowledge and be honest about shortcomings, but be sure to give yourself credit for hard work, effort, progress, and growth!

SURVEY METHOD

- ▶ This method involves asking some trusted friends for input and opinions. Getting someone else's perspective is a great way to get a bit more objectivity.
- ▶ Ask others who may have been in a similar situation about their experiences to help determine how rational or objective your thoughts may be.
- ▶ This isn't to say to take other's opinions as an objective authority, but you can use them as a gauge or a reference.
- ▶ Talking to a trusted person about your thoughts is also just a great activity for working through thoughts and feelings in general!

RECAP

- ▶ Be intentional about paying attention to your automatic negative thoughts
- ▶ Identify cognitive distortions in your thoughts
- ▶ Reframe distorted thoughts by: being objective, being compassionate, seeing in shades of grey, or asking a friend
- ▶ Try writing down a thought, and then challenging it by writing three alternative, reframed thoughts

BONUS TIP

- ▶ Name your “brain bully” and get aggressive with it!
- ▶ Stand up for yourself against your own negative thoughts and say “I’m not going to accept being spoken to in that way”
- ▶ Looking at your automatic negative thoughts as a playground bully can help to see how ridiculous and out of line they really are
- ▶ Learning to stand up to and create boundaries with your own negative thoughts is also a great first step in learning how to stand up for yourself and create healthy boundaries with others

Self Talk & Thinking Traps

[A few other things we discussed!]

- Try finding the humour in things! Sometimes things really are just a bit ridiculous and we can actually laugh them off. One of the peer mentors recommended pushing these thoughts to a hilariously overblown final conclusion. If you're dealing with mind reading and thinking "oh my goodness, my friend totally hates me" go ahead and imagine what it would look like if that were real—if you imagine your friend coming over and saying to you "you are the total worst and I absolutely can't stand you, our entire friendship has been a cruel joke!" you'll probably actually laugh because you'll see how unrealistic and out of character that would really be. It's kind of like the "riddikulus" spell in Harry Potter: find a way to make your thought ridiculously, outlandishly silly, and then go ahead and laugh at it!
- Write it out. Doing some journalling is a great way to work through distorted thoughts. Go ahead and just pour all your fears and worries and icky feelings out onto a piece of paper. Anything that's going through your mind connected to your distorted thoughts—write it down! Once it's all written down you can go through your thoughts one by one and look at them more objectively. One of the peer mentors likes to do this for helping with fears and anxieties; by writing down all of their fears about something, they can then go back and look at each one in a more realistic and objective way (which usually leads to the realization that a lot of the fears are not very realistic, and if they are, you're in a much calmer head space to make a plan for how you'll deal with them).
- Examine the root of your distortions. Our self-talk is influenced by our life experiences. Some of us are more prone to certain cognitive distortions because we have experiences

or mental illnesses that predispose us to those sorts of thoughts. It can be a helpful practice to try to get at the root of why our brains are so insistent on looking at things a certain way. If you can make the connection between your experiences/circumstances and your distortions it can make it a lot easier to see those distortions for what they are, and make a plan for how to move forward and deal with them in a healthy way. If you're noticing a lot of distortions that seem rooted in a particular event or experience in your life, this may be something to consider talking to a counsellor about.

- Forgiving yourself! Everyone is human, none of us are perfect, we all make mistakes. When dealing with thinking traps and negative self-talk, remember above all to be gentle and compassionate with yourself. It's okay to mess up, it's okay to do stuff wrong, it's okay to try and fail and try again. A lot of thinking traps are rooted in an inability to forgive ourselves for mistakes, or be compassionate with ourselves about not being perfect. By going through your thoughts and identifying cognitive distortions you can then use the reframing strategies we talked about to be more forgiving and compassionate with yourself.
- In a similar vein, if you find yourself wanting to constantly apologize for everything you do, try reframing apologies as thank-yous. (Obviously sometimes apologies are necessary and important! But a lot of us end up doing a lot of unnecessary apologizing that is sometimes rooted in distorted thoughts.) Instead of saying "I'm so sorry I needed so much of your time to help with this" say "Thank you so much for taking the time to help me." Instead of saying "I'm so sorry for being so sensitive" try "Thank you for being so supportive of my feelings." One of the peer mentors likes to use this tip to reframe their thoughts from feeling guilty about needing support from people, to feeling grateful for support from people. This can make a big difference both for your relationships and your own sense of self-worth.