

CBT - Anxiety and Depression

In any year around 1 in 6 people experience anxiety and/or depression. This can happen for a wide range of complex reasons.

Those who are vulnerable to anxiety and/or depression are prone to 'negative automatic thoughts' (NATs) when things go wrong. That is, thoughts that seem to have a life of their own, that pop into your head, take flight not as the result of a conscious process but in an automatic, involuntary way and in a negative spiral.

It's natural to feel irritated, frustrated or fed up when things go wrong. The problem with NATs is that you may feel they are outside your control and escalate out of proportion. This may happen because they are characterised by a number of features which can distort thinking. We are all prone to distorted thinking at times but when we are under stress or depressed, these distortions can become more exaggerated.

Some of these types of distorted thinking may be familiar and others may not.

NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS AND THINKING PATTERNS

BLACK AND WHITE THINKING – this means thinking in absolutes, as either black or white, good or bad, with no middle ground. It can lead to judging people, yourself included, and events using general labels, for example 'he's an idiot', 'I'm hopeless', 'I'll never learn to drive', 'I'm a complete failure'. You may condemn yourself completely as a person on the basis of a single event. It can help to understand that seeming opposites can exist together (you could lose a deal but still be very good at your job for example) and that there are many shades of grey. Instead, consider the grey area in between – what's going on there and could that apply to you or your behaviour. Maybe you want an A* but getting a B would not make you a failure, it wouldn't be perfect but it would be okay. Maybe you tripped because you're a bit tired or there was a bump in the road, not because you're a hopelessly clumsy person.

CATASTROPHISING – this means magnifying or exaggerating the importance of events and how awful or unpleasant they will be, catapulting yourself into the future and over-estimating the chances of disaster eg if I fail this test, I'll fail all my exams, never get a job and end up homeless. If you have a setback you may view it as a never-ending pattern of defeat. Pause and weigh up the evidence, put your thoughts into perspective and consider less awful explanations. Ask how likely is that worst case scenario to happen as a percentage? Is it what happened last time something small went wrong or were things actually okay?

PERSONALISING – You may take responsibility and blame for anything unpleasant even if it has little or nothing to do with you. It can help to remove yourself from the middle of the universe, consider alternative explanations that don't revolve around you, consider how others may have interpreted the event. Ask what else could be going on.

GENERALISING – You may take a single event as a predictor of everything. For example, you come second in a race and find yourself thinking you'll always come second, never be the winner.

NEGATIVE FOCUS/DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVE – this means focussing on the negative, and in the process ignoring or misinterpreting positive aspects of the situation. You may tend to focus on your weaknesses and not your strengths. If you've done a good job you may filter out or overlook the positive comments and focus on and remember only the rare negative. Practice accepting positive feedback and be aware of your response bias.

FORTUNE TELLING – You may tend to jump to conclusions and make negative interpretations even though there are few facts to base this on. In a way you are predicting the future and you are most likely to predict that negative things will happen. Be aware of this and stop to consider that your guesses may be wrong, that they are only guesses. That thoughts and feelings are not facts. Try generating alternative responses.

MINDREADING is part of this and means assuming you know what others are thinking eg he didn't call so he hates me. Again, challenge this, ask what else it could mean, ask whether you have any evidence to back up your first thought on this.

DEMANDS OR LIVING BY FIXED RULES – You may tend towards fixed rules and unrealistic expectations. Do you often find yourself saying 'should', 'must' and 'can't'. This can lead to unnecessary guilt and disappointment. The more rigid these statements are, the more disappointed, angry, depressed or guilty you are likely to feel. Challenge your rigid thinking, replace 'should', 'must' and 'have to' with 'wish', 'want', and 'it would be nice if..'. Be kinder to yourself.

LABELLING – If you label yourself, or others, as 'no good', 'useless' or 'untrustworthy', or a situation as being 'completely unsafe', you are globally rating things that are far too complex for a definite label. Try to avoid this type of generalisation and focus on how multifaceted things and people can be.

EMOTIONAL REASONING – Your feelings are not hard evidence of the way things are and if you are anxious, depressed or angry, this can produce a distorted view of reality. Take a step back and ask yourself – is there hard evidence to support my feelings at the moment? You may think 'I feel really terrible therefore the situation must be really bad, beyond saving in fact'. Remind yourself that thoughts and feelings are not facts.

LOW FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE – when you are feeling low, stressed or angry, you may assume something that is difficult to tolerate is 'intolerable' or 'unbearable'. You may magnify how bad it is and minimise your ability to cope (and then possibly give up). Consider whether you can bear the 'unbearable' and how you have coped in the past. Remember that it may be difficult to bear in the short run but good for you in the long run. Ask yourself, can I survive this?

CBT is based on the idea that the events in our lives are not always the most important thing – it's the way we interpret those events that determines what happens next. If you fail your driving test first time and you take this to mean that you will never pass because you're a rubbish driver (all or nothing thinking) and you always screw things up (generalising/personalising) – the chances are you will stop taking lessons, decide against retaking the test and sure enough you won't ever pass because you won't give yourself that opportunity. You decided what the event meant and acted on this, reinforcing your faulty interpretation.

CHALLENGING AND CHANGING NATS

The key to defeating NATs is – **IDENTIFY, NOTICE AND CHALLENGE**. That is, identify which of the above are going on for you, try to notice them when they happen and then learn to challenge them. Challenge by pausing, questioning your thinking, looking for evidence to support or refute the negative thinking you've picked up on, move away from absolutes and extremes in favour of the middle ground – difficult but possible!

To intercept the negative spiral, the following things are helpful. Some are long-term goals while others can be put into practice immediately. Some may apply to you and others may not.

- Challenge negative thinking by identifying distorted thinking patterns (above) and break the cycle by beginning to replace these patterns with more rational thoughts. Notice the link between the way you think, feel and behave in response to an event and recognise that this can be more important than the actual event that triggered your annoyance or sadness. In other words, it's not the event that is important but the way you think/feel about the event
- Increase activity levels in whatever way works for you – the gym, walking, sport, yoga. This will effect mood and aid sleep. Sleep is good.
- Use support systems if you have them. A close, confiding relationship is the single most effective protection against depression. You may notice an urge to withdraw and while introverts do need that alone time to restore themselves, staying in contact with support systems is also very important.
- Assert yourself by saying 'no' to excessive demands without guilt. Make time and space to look after yourself.
- Work towards understanding the many factors, past and present, that may have led you to feel the way you do

EXCERCISES WORTH TRYING

As a homework, get some paper and pen and write down your five most worrying thoughts, then pick whichever one seems uppermost in your mind today. This can be a thought that arose out of something that happened recently or a long held thought about yourself or the world.

Now go through the following exercises, writing everything down as you go. This is not an exercise in Pollyanna style positive thinking. It is about challenging yourself to explore different perspectives and question thinking patterns that may once have been helpful or necessary coping strategies but are now out of date, entrenched and destructive.

Take one worrying thought –

1. What's the evidence? Instead of assuming the thought is simply a matter of fact, split the page into two columns and write down the evidence for both sides of the argument.
2. Explore the worst case scenario. A huge cloud of vague fear and worry is all the more terrifying or anxiety provoking because it has no boundaries, recognisable shape or centre. It is impossible to tackle because it hasn't been defined. Take your chosen thought and try to break it down. What's the worst that could happen and what would that mean, how would you handle it, would you survive it? This can be useful in itself and can sometimes lead to deeper insights around what you are afraid of and when and why that line of thinking first got established.
3. Other perspectives. Think of 2 or 3 significant people in your life and ask yourself how they would view the same situation and how they might respond to it. What advice would they give? What action would they take? Or, what advice would you give someone else?
4. Cost-benefit analysis. Consider the effect of thinking this particular thought. How is it helping you and how is it hurting you? List in writing the advantages and disadvantages of holding this particular negative thought or belief.
5. Remind yourself about shades of grey. Notice any tendency to think in black and white, all or nothing terms. Ask for instance whether you are considering something as a total failure

or a total success when in fact it's probably somewhere in between, a success in some ways, a failure in others. Try rating how sure you are about the thought now, using a scale from 1-100. Are things as clear cut as you thought? Are you 70% sure of it or 30% sure.

6. Check your perspective. Consider this negative thought or worry and the possible consequences (back to worst case scenario) and compare it to past issues or problems – plot it on a line alongside these. How bad is it? It may be the worst thing you have faced and it may not – either way it may be useful to get a feel for this.

7. If you have done a lifeline, get it out. Have you faced this problem before? Is this thought or way of thinking familiar? Has it been helpful in the past? How did you learn to develop this response/way of thinking – was it a triggering event, a coping strategy, a parental or peer influence? Is it still relevant/useful now?

Mindfulness backdrop to CBT

- **Acceptance** In response to CBT you may feel: 'It's all very well understanding the way distorted thinking effects the way I feel but it doesn't stop me feeling that way. I can't just decide not to have those feelings.' Acceptance is about allowing yourself to have those feeling, they are yours, but then let them pass through, accept that your feelings are real but then challenge the thoughts that bring them about in order to get perspective, proportion and validity straight.

- **Acceptance is not resignation** - acceptance allows us, as a vital first step, to become fully aware of difficulties, and then, if appropriate, to respond in a skilful way, rather than to react, in knee-jerk fashion, by automatically running some of our old (often unhelpful) strategies for dealing with difficulties.

- **Neuro plasticity** - There's a lot of recent research showing that it is possible to establish new neural pathways or re-establish old, underused ones. Significantly, it seems that the brain and the way it works is not fixed but formed by use which suggests that by learning to think about things in a different way and repeatedly challenging negative automatic thoughts, we can make long term changes. This is something worth bearing in mind when trying to move away from old thinking patterns and practicing new ones. It can be helpful to think of the brain like a muscle that needs to be exercised and built up. It's a matter of practice.

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