Replacing Unhelpful Thoughts With Helpful Alternatives

Coping

- Exercise
- 20 min
- Client
- Yes

The basic premise of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is that emotions and behaviors are the result of a person's interpretation of a situation [1]. This interpretation, or *thought*, can be positive and helpful or negative and unhelpful (or neutral). Because habitually negative, unhelpful thinking is known to trigger and maintain mental health issues, including depression and anxiety [2], CBT interventions focus on challenging such thinking and forming new, helpful thoughts to engage with instead [1, 3].

This exercise invites clients to examine the "helpfulness" of a thought they are having about a current challenging situation. The client analyzes this thought from four angles: how realistic it is, subsequent emotion, level of self-compassion, and consequent behavior. Next, using these four angles, the client formulates a more helpful alternative thought.

Author

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Goal

This tool aims to teach clients how to reframe unhelpful, negative thoughts into thoughts that are realistic, self-compassionate, and result in constructive emotions and actions.

Advice

- This exercise is written for clients who are experiencing negative, unhelpful thinking in relation to a current challenging situation. However, it can also be used for clients who are not necessarily facing a challenging situation at present but instead experience negative, unhelpful thinking more habitually. Practitioners can instruct these clients to begin the exercise at Step 2 (i.e., skip Step 1) and identify an unhelpful, negative thought they commonly have about themselves.

- Allow clients to take their time to come up with a helpful alternative thought (Step 4) and offer any guidance they might need, especially if the client is new to cognitive therapies.

■ This exercise can be adapted for use with groups. Simply divide the group into pairs and have one person complete the exercise while the other person fills out the form (Appendix A) on their behalf. At steps 3 and 5, the "helpfulness" of the identified thoughts can be discussed openly within pairs using the four listed questions.

References

1. Beck, A. T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B. F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive therapy of depression.* Guilford Press.

2. Ehring, T., & Watkins, E. R. (2008). Repetitive negative thinking as a transdiagnostic process. *International Journal of Cognitive Therapy, 1*(3), 192-205.

3. Hackmann, A. (1997). The transformation of meaning in cognitive therapy. In M. J. Power & C. R. Brewin (Eds.), *The transformation of meaning in psychological therapies: Integrating theory and practice* (pp. 125-140). John Wiley & Sons.

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Many people struggle with unhelpful negative thoughts popping into their minds throughout the day. These thoughts often negatively influence mood and wellbeing. Unhelpful negative thoughts tend to be unrealistic and overly self-critical. Moreover, these thoughts trigger negative feelings and prevent us from taking action to improve our situation. These thoughts can pop up so frequently and quickly that we are not aware of them. They are "automatic."

Helpful thoughts, on the other hand, promote wellbeing. These thoughts tend to be realistic and reflect kindness and understanding toward ourselves. Moreover, they trigger positive feelings (or, at least, do not trigger negative feelings) and prompt us to take actions that help improve the situation.

In this exercise, we will look at the "helpfulness" of one of your negative thoughts and consider a more helpful alternative thought using four key questions. Appendix B shows a completed version of this exercise.

Step 1: Describe a challenging situation

In the first row of the table in Appendix A, briefly describe a challenging situation that you are facing at the moment.

Step 2: Identify the automatic unhelpful thought

Take a moment to notice what thoughts are going through your mind right now in relation to the situation above, especially any negative, unhelpful thoughts. In the second row (second column) of the table in Appendix A, write down one negative thought that popped up.

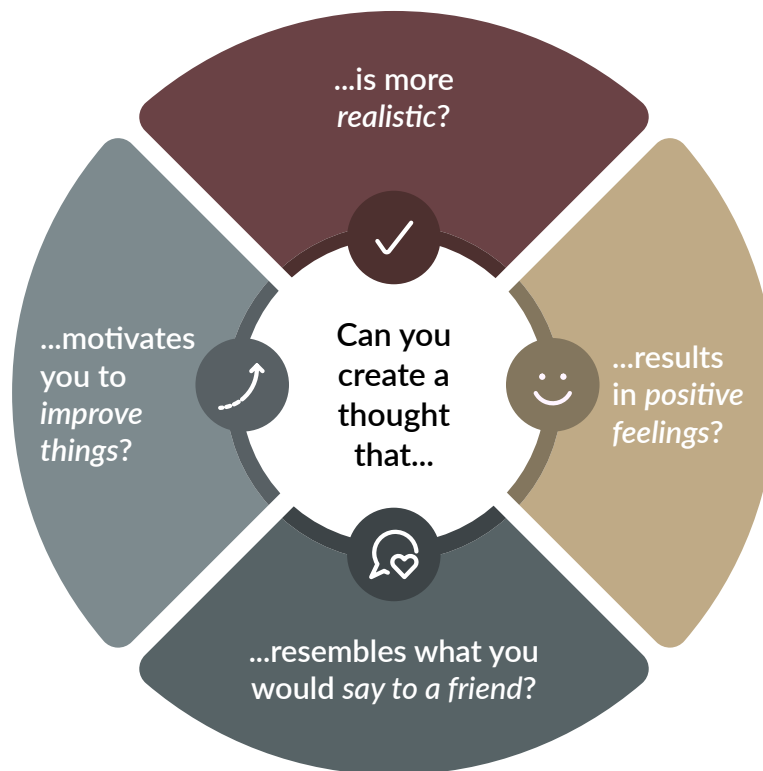### Step 3: Rate the helpfulness of this thought

Let's now consider how helpful (or not-so-helpful!) this thought is on a 10-point scale (1 = not helpful at all; 10 = extremely helpful) by asking yourself:

- *How realistic is this thought?*
- *How positive are the feelings that result from this thought?*
- *How likely is it that I would say this to a friend?*
- *How much does this thought motivate me to improve things?*

Consider each of these questions carefully and then write your ratings down in the second column of the table in Appendix A.

Step 4: Come up with a more helpful alternative thought

Now try coming up with a more helpful thought to replace this unhelpful one. This alternative helpful thought may come about by drawing on the four questions from the previous step. Use the infographic below to formulate a more helpful alternative thought.

Once you have come up with a more helpful way to think about your situation, write this thought down in the second row (last column) of the table in Appendix A.

Step 5: Rate the helpfulness of this alternative thought

Rate how helpful this new thought is on a 10-point scale (1 = not helpful at all; 10 = extremely helpful) by once again asking yourself:

- *How realistic is this thought?*
- *How positive are the feelings that result from this thought?*
- *How likely is it that I would say this to a friend?*
- *How much does this thought motivate me to improve things?*

Consider each of these questions carefully and then write your ratings down in the last column of the table in Appendix A.

Appendix A: Thought record

Situation	Unhelpful thought		Alternative helpful thought	
	How realistic is this thought? (1 = not at all realistic; 10 = very realistic)	/10	How realistic is this thought? (1 = not at all realistic; 10 = very realistic)	/10
	How positive are the feelings that result from this thought? (1 = not positive at all; 10 = very positive)	/10	How positive are the feelings that result from this thought? (1 = not positive at all; 10 = very positive)	/10
	How likely is it that I would say this to a friend? (1 = not likely at all; 10 = very likely)	/10	How likely is it that I would say this to a friend? (1 = not likely at all; 10 = very likely)	/10
	How much does this thought motivate me to improve things? (1 = not at all motivating; 10 = very motivating)	/10	How much does this thought motivate me to improve things? (1 = not at all motivating; 10 = very motivating)	/10

Appendix B: Example of a completed thought record

Situation	I have to give a presentation at work about a topic that I know little about.	
	Unhelpful thought	Alternative helpful thought
	E.g., I will never be able to successfully deliver a high-quality presentation.	E.g., If I work hard, I can create a valuable presentation.
How realistic is this thought? (1 = not at all realistic; 10 = very realistic)	6/10	8/10
How positive are the feelings that result from this thought? (1 = not positive at all; 10 = very positive)	2/10	8/10
How likely is it that I would say this to a friend? (1 = not likely at all; 10 = very likely)	2/10	9/10
How much does this thought motivate me to improve things? (1 = not at all motivating; 10 = very motivating)	3/10	8/10