



The Most Helpful Thoughts

 Mindset

 Exercise

 15 min

 Client

 No

Many psychological problems develop due to inaccurate and unhelpful ways of thinking [1]. If thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are interrelated, then it stands to reason that changing unhelpful thinking will ultimately change how we feel and behave. A fundamental part of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is to question and challenge the accuracy of unhelpful thoughts to alleviate distress and realign thinking with reality [2]. While everyone has unhelpful thoughts from time to time, people can become caught up in a cycle of unhelpful thinking patterns, like filtering and catastrophizing, that can make negative or stressful situations appear worse than they are.

When left unchallenged, excessive unhelpful thoughts are self-defeating and cause people to misinterpret everyday situations and behave in ways that may exacerbate existing problems [3]. Unsurprisingly, research suggests a strong relationship between unhelpful thinking and psychopathology. Specifically, unhelpful thinking increases the likelihood of adverse mood changes, worsens symptoms of OCD [4], maintains and exacerbates anxiety and depression [5], and is linked to self-criticism, decreased self-esteem, and diminished self-compassion [1].

Unhelpful thinking can become recurrent, intrusive, and more believable [3]. Therefore, individuals should be equipped with skills that allow them to identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts and then formulate more helpful thoughts in any given situation. The ability to identify and change unhelpful thoughts has many benefits. It reduces stress and anxiety, strengthens relationships, and improves self-confidence and self-esteem, for instance [1]. This exercise will help clients reflect on their experiences, identify unhelpful thoughts, and consider more helpful alternatives in stressful or challenging situations.



Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

This exercise aims to help clients identify and evaluate unhelpful thoughts. In doing so, clients will learn to recognize unhelpful thoughts and consider more helpful alternatives in a given situation.



Advice

- With practice, identifying more helpful thoughts in challenging situations will become internalized. The process can then be carried out in the moment rather than after a negative experience.
- It should be emphasized that it is normal to have unhelpful thoughts from time to time. These thoughts should be addressed when they become persistent, cause distress, and affect the client's day-to-day life. This exercise will guide clients through the steps required to manage these unhelpful thoughts.
- Clients should understand that recognizing unhelpful thoughts and considering more helpful alternatives will take time and commitment. Unhelpful thoughts can be persistent and difficult to ignore; therefore, this exercise should be carried out regularly.
- If required, sample responses to questions are provided in Appendix.



References

1. Knowles, S.R., Apputhurai, P., & Bates, G.W. (2017). Development and validation of the brief unhelpful thoughts scale (BUTS). *Journal of Psychology & Psychotherapy, 4*, 61-70.
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3. Williams, C., & Garland, A. (2002). Identifying and challenging unhelpful thinking. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, 8*, 377-386.
4. Clark, D. A., & Beck, A. T. (2010). *Cognitive therapy of anxiety disorders*. Guilford Press.
5. Wong, S.S. (2008). The relations of the cognitive triad, dysfunctional attitudes, automatic thoughts, and irrational beliefs with test anxiety. *Current Psychology, 27*, 177-91.



The Most Helpful Thoughts

Sometimes, how you think about an experience or situation is not helpful. Have you ever assumed the worst would happen or made negative predictions about how a situation would turn out? Or did you find yourself second-guessing what others think of you? These thoughts tend to be automatic and arise so quickly that you might not realize that you have them.

While it is normal to have unhelpful thoughts from time to time, they can become difficult to ignore. When this kind of thinking becomes persistent or overwhelming, it can have a negative effect on your behavior, your emotions, and even your physical well-being. These kinds of unhelpful thoughts can make you feel inadequate, anxious, embarrassed, or angry, among other negative emotions.

These thoughts might feel like the truth; however, how you view your experiences is often based on emotions and assumptions, *not* on facts.

Being more aware of unhelpful thinking will help you reflect on situations from a perspective that allows you to check the “truth” of your thoughts. This is a much more helpful way of thinking about and managing difficult situations. This exercise will help you identify unhelpful thoughts and consider alternatives that are more helpful so that you can uncover new ways of thinking about your experiences and problematic situations.

Step 1: Identifying unhelpful thoughts

To begin this exercise, you will think about an unhelpful thought you frequently have or have had in the past and describe the situation in which the unhelpful thought occurred. For example, you give a speech and notice someone looking at their phone. You might think, “Look at how bored they are, I’m really bad at this!” Or perhaps a colleague makes a mistake on a work project, and you think, “You’re useless!”

These are not helpful thoughts as they do nothing to improve your situation, nor are they necessarily a true representation of the facts. Some other examples of unhelpful thoughts include, “I’m a failure,” “They’re only being nice to me because they have to,” “No one likes me,” or “I can’t do this!”

Now, think of a time when you experienced these kinds of unhelpful thoughts. Describe the specific situation in the space below:



What thought(s) were present at the time?

How did these thoughts make you feel?

Step 2: Analyzing the helpfulness of thoughts

Before you can formulate more helpful thoughts, you must first analyze why this line of thinking was unhelpful in the situation described above. Taking a step back, think about the thoughts described above and answer the following question.

Why was this line of thinking not helpful in this situation?



Step 3: Identifying more helpful thoughts

This step is about formulating a new helpful thought to replace the unhelpful thought detailed above. When you recognize an unhelpful thought for what it is, you can let that thought go and replace it with another that is more helpful. Helpful thinking means taking a perspective that results in positive, constructive feelings that help you to better deal with a challenging situation.

For instance, imagine you experience high-stress levels before delivering a presentation.

Thinking, “Oh my God, I’m losing it and will make a fool of myself,” will be likely to generate more negative stressful feelings. It will probably make it more difficult for you to deal with the challenging situation. A more helpful alternative thought would be: “It’s normal and ok to be stressed. All I can do is give it my best.” These thoughts will likely result in more positive feelings of reassurance that are more helpful for dealing with stressful situations.

To give another example, imagine you pass a friend on the street. You smile and wave, but she ignores you and looks away. Here, you might think, “Oh no, what have I done to upset her? She must be angry at me.” These thoughts are likely to result in feelings of anxiety and self-doubt. A more helpful thought would be: “Okay, she didn’t return my greeting but, when I think about it, she has no reason to be upset with me. I know I haven’t done anything to offend her, so it’s likely she just didn’t see me.” These thoughts will probably result in reassurance and help you move on and forget about the incident.

Consider the situation you described in step 1 and answer the following questions.

How do you wish you had felt in this situation?

What kind of thoughts would help you feel that way? Describe them below:



Think about the most optimistic and resilient person you know. What would he/she think in this situation?

Step 4: Reflecting on helpful thoughts

Now that you have considered and identified more helpful thoughts, it is time for you to reflect upon them. Take a moment to think about the alternative thoughts detailed in the previous step and ask yourself the following question:

In what ways are these thoughts more helpful in this situation?

How have these helpful alternatives changed how you feel about the situation?



Step 5: Reflection

- How do you view the situation now after completing the exercise?
- What did this exercise teach you about your thoughts in difficult or stressful situations?
- How did this exercise help you understand the effects of unhelpful thoughts?
- What insights have you gained from this exercise?
- What did you find most challenging about this exercise?
- How did you overcome this challenge?

Appendix: Example responses to questions

Step 1: Identifying unhelpful thoughts

Think of a time when you experienced unhelpful thoughts and describe the specific situation in the space below:

A few weeks ago, I gave a speech at my best friend's wedding. I worked hard to get it right, and I was proud of how it turned out. During the speech, I glanced up and noticed one of the guests was looking at his phone. He looked so bored and uninterested.

What thought(s) were present at the time?

Look at how bored he is. I'm really bad at this! This is humiliating, and I wish I'd never agreed to give a speech in the first place. Everyone thinks I'm an idiot. Why did I think this was a good idea?

How did these thoughts make you feel?

I felt like a complete failure, like I had let my best friend down on his wedding day. I was so embarrassed and just wanted it to be over as quickly as possible.

Step 2: Analyzing the helpfulness of thoughts

Why was this line of thinking not helpful in this situation?

These thoughts weren't helpful in this situation because I was already very nervous about delivering the speech, and they made it even worse. Once I started thinking like this, I made more mistakes and stumbled over words even though I knew them by heart. Thinking like this did nothing to help me in this situation, and I let my emotions get the better of me.

Step 3: Identifying more helpful thoughts

How do you wish you had felt in this situation?

I wish I had felt calmer and more confident and that I didn't care so much if some guests didn't like my speech.

What kind of thoughts would have helped you feel this way?

It was just one person in the entire room, and he was probably turning his volume down during the speeches. I worked hard and was happy with my speech before that happened. I know I did a good job.

Think of the most optimistic and resilient person you know. What would he/she think in this situation?

The most optimistic person I know is my brother, and he wouldn't have given it a second thought. He would have been confident that his speech was good because it was a message coming straight from the heart.



Step 4: Reflecting on helpful thoughts

In what ways are these thoughts more helpful in this situation?

If I had thought like this, I wouldn't have made so many additional mistakes. My speech would have gone better if I had just believed in my abilities. These thoughts would have reminded me of all the hard work I put into delivering a great speech and helped me feel more confident.

How have these helpful alternatives changed how you feel about the situation?

I honestly feel better about the whole thing. I have nothing to be embarrassed about, and I'm not an idiot or a failure. I gave way too much attention to this one silly incident. I was well prepared, and I did a good job. My friend and his bride loved it, and that's all that matters.