

 Coping Exercise 20 min Client Yes

Breaking the Vicious Cycle

Mental health issues often exist and persist because of a negative feedback loop known as a *vicious cycle* [1, 2]. A vicious cycle is a sequence of negative events that build on and reinforce each other [2]. For example, a person with depression might wake up in the morning feeling flat and unmotivated, leading to thoughts like “I can’t be bothered with today” and “I have nothing to look forward to.” This person may then choose to stay in bed, which would likely result in him or her feeling even more tired and unmotivated, feeding back into the problem of feeling depressed. While going back to sleep may initially help this person avoid feeling depressed, a long-term effect of inaction and isolation only worsens the problem.

Unhelpful behaviors in an individual’s vicious cycle can be identified and targeted as a point of intervention [1, 2]. In the above-mentioned example, breaking the vicious cycle might involve going for a brisk walk first thing in the morning. If we were then to map the flow-on effects of this more *healthy cycle*, we might see this individual experiencing positive feelings like a sense of achievement and feeling more motivated and helpful thoughts, like “I’m proud of myself for getting out for a walk” and “what a beautiful day,” which may reinforce the healthy behavior of a morning walk, serving to improve the depression over time.

This exercise involves helping clients analyze a vicious cycle by exploring the sequence of negative events that are currently reinforcing a personal problem. The exercise then aims to help the client break out of this cycle and enter a healthy, adaptive cycle to alleviate the problem he or she faces.



Author

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Goal

This tool aims to help clients analyze a vicious cycle by exploring the sequence of negative events that are currently reinforcing a personal problem and to help them break out of this cycle and enter a healthy, adaptive cycle.



Advice

- It is important to note that some clients may find it difficult to break their vicious cycle, particularly those trapped in the cycle for many years. The unhelpful behaviors that reinforce the problem may be so ingrained that extra time and effort are needed to replace these behaviors with healthy ones. Therefore, practitioners should provide additional guidance for steps 6 and 7 to ensure clients choose a realistic and feasible new behavior. Practitioners may offer suggestions or ask questions, such as “how easy or difficult would it be for you to give this new activity a go in the next week?” and “are there any barriers to you completing this activity?,” to ensure feasibility.
- In the last reflection question, clients consider whether other healthy or helpful activities could help them deal with their problem. For each of these healthy activities, practitioners can recommend that the client repeat Part C of the exercise. By trying and testing each selected healthy activity, the likelihood that one (or more) of these healthy activities will stick is maximized, and the client’s newfound healthy cycle will be maintained.



References

1. Albano, A. M., & Barlow, D. H. (1996). Breaking the vicious cycle: Cognitive-behavioral group treatment for socially anxious youth. In E. D. Hibbs & P. S. Jensen (Eds.), *Psychosocial treatments for child and adolescent disorders: Empirically based strategies for clinical practice* (pp. 43-62). American Psychological Association.
2. Centre for Clinical Interventions. (n.d.). *The vicious cycle of depression* [Fact sheet]. Government of Western Australia. https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~/_/media/CCI/Mental-Health-Professionals/Depression/Depression---Information-Sheets/Depression-Information-Sheet---04---Vicious-Cycle-for-Depression.pdf

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Introduction

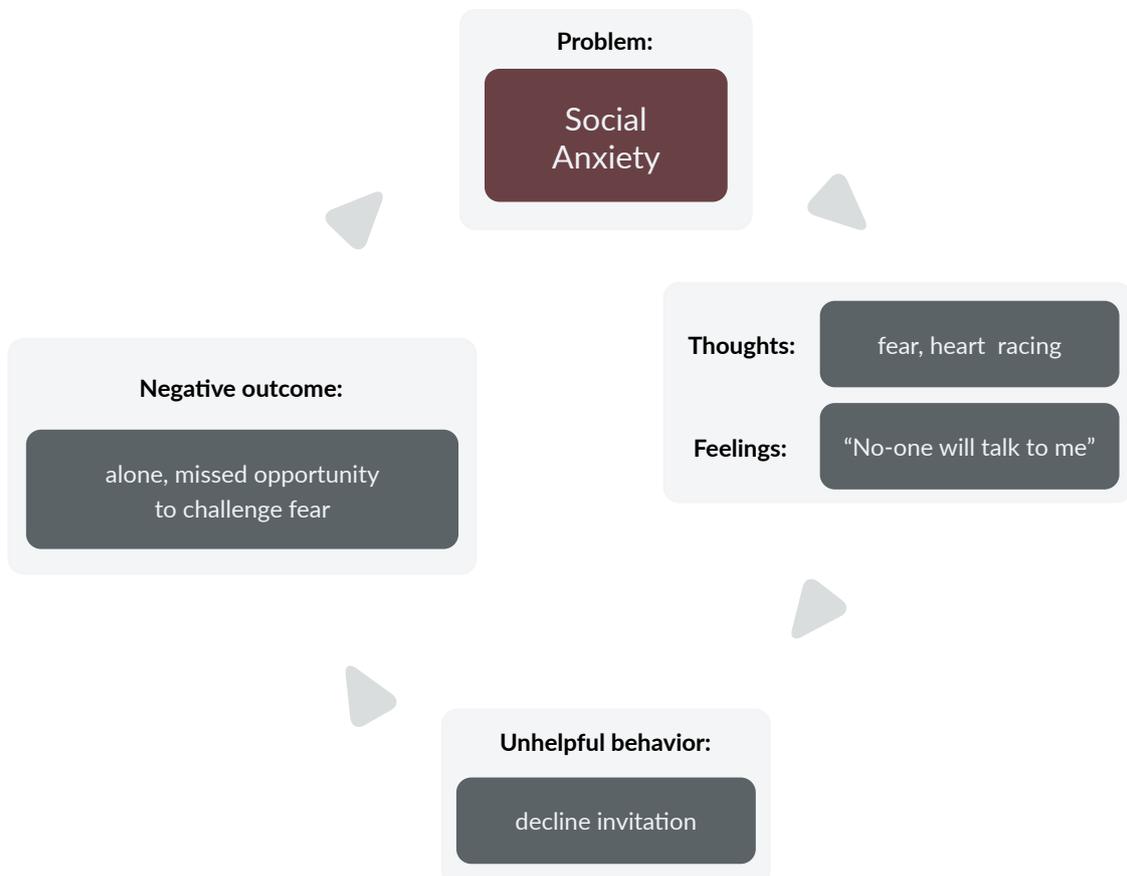
When we are in the throes of a personal problem, it is common that we do things that feed back into the problem, making it worse. This negative feedback loop is known as a vicious cycle. In this exercise, we will analyze your vicious cycle and explore some ways that might help you break this cycle.

Part A: Understanding vicious cycles

A vicious cycle refers to a negative series of events that build on and reinforce each other. Take, for example, feeling socially anxious. Receiving an invitation to a social event might lead a person with social anxiety to feel overwhelmed by fear and have thoughts like, “I won’t know anyone” and “no one will want to talk to me,” resulting in declining the invitation.

Although staying at home may initially help reduce feelings of fear, this person might feel even more alone and disconnected than before.

Fig. 1. An example of a vicious cycle



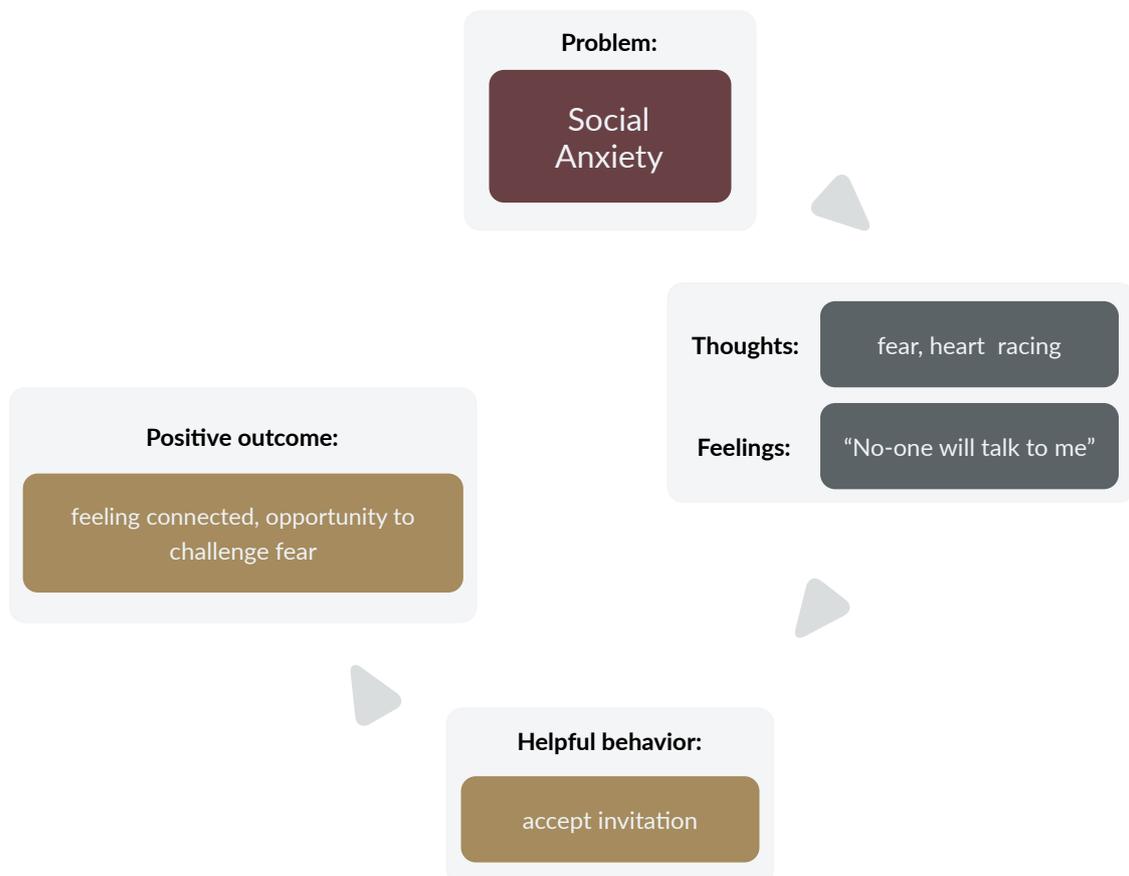
Furthermore, had this person decided to go to the event and ended up having a good time, it would challenge his or her fear and prove the self-doubt was unjustified. However, because the social event was avoided, this opportunity to challenge and discount the fear was missed, making it more likely that the fear will persist or become even stronger.

In this example (summarized in Fig. 1), the problem (social anxiety) led to difficult thoughts and feelings (fear and self-doubt), which resulted in an unhelpful behavior (declining the invitation) that reinforced the problem (stronger social anxiety).

Breaking this vicious cycle could involve accepting the invitation and attending the event instead of declining the invitation.

In the short term, accepting the invitation may cause the person to experience some stress. However, in the long run, attending the social event could result in this person not only feeling more connected to others and the world around them but also considering the possibility of experiencing a positive social encounter (e.g., meeting someone new, having a joyful conversation, or even making a friend), which could improve their social anxiety (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. An example of how a vicious cycle can be broken





Part B: Reveal your vicious cycle

Now that we have explained the idea of a vicious cycle let's see if we can use this cycle to understand better a problem that you are currently facing.

Step 1: Identify the problem

Identify a personal problem that you are facing now. Briefly describe this problem at the top of your vicious cycle diagram in box #1 (Appendix A).

Step 2: Describe the signs

What thoughts and feelings show up in your response to the problem you described in the previous step? Moving clockwise around your vicious cycle diagram (Appendix A), list these signs in box #2.

Step 3: Identify unhelpful behaviors that keep the problem going

What unhelpful things do you do in response to this problem and the difficult thoughts and feelings that go with it? List these unhelpful behaviors at the bottom of your vicious cycle diagram in box #3 (Appendix A).

Step 4: Describe the negative outcome

What negative outcomes does the behavior(s) you described in the previous step lead to? Moving clockwise around your vicious cycle diagram (Appendix A), list the negative outcomes of your behavior in box #4.

Step 5: Complete your vicious cycle

How do the negative outcomes you described in the previous step make the problem worse? Describe the negative influence of these outcomes on your problem in box #5.

Part C: Break out of your vicious cycle

Step 6: Choose to do one thing differently

As you can see in your vicious cycle diagram, the problem you are experiencing leads to a range of difficult thoughts and feelings, encouraging you to act in unhelpful ways and making the problem worse.



To break out of this cycle, one thing you can do is to start doing something helpful or healthy instead of continuing to act in the same unhelpful way. For example, if you binge-watch TV because your depression is causing you to feel fatigued, you could replace this activity with going for a brisk walk. Replacing binge-watching TV with going for a walk means that your depression is no longer being fueled (made worse) by inaction and isolation. The depression may even get better because of a release of endorphins during the walk and feeling like you have achieved something afterward. You may also have a positive experience or encounter while out and about.

For the actions listed in Step 3, ask yourself, *“What is something healthy or helpful that I could do instead?”*

Once you come up with something healthy or helpful that you could do instead, write it down in box #3 (Helpful behavior) provided in Appendix B.

Step 7: Describe the positive outcome

What positive outcomes does the behavior(s) you described in the previous step lead to? In appendix B, list the positive outcomes of your behavior in box #4.

Step 8: Complete your healthy cycle

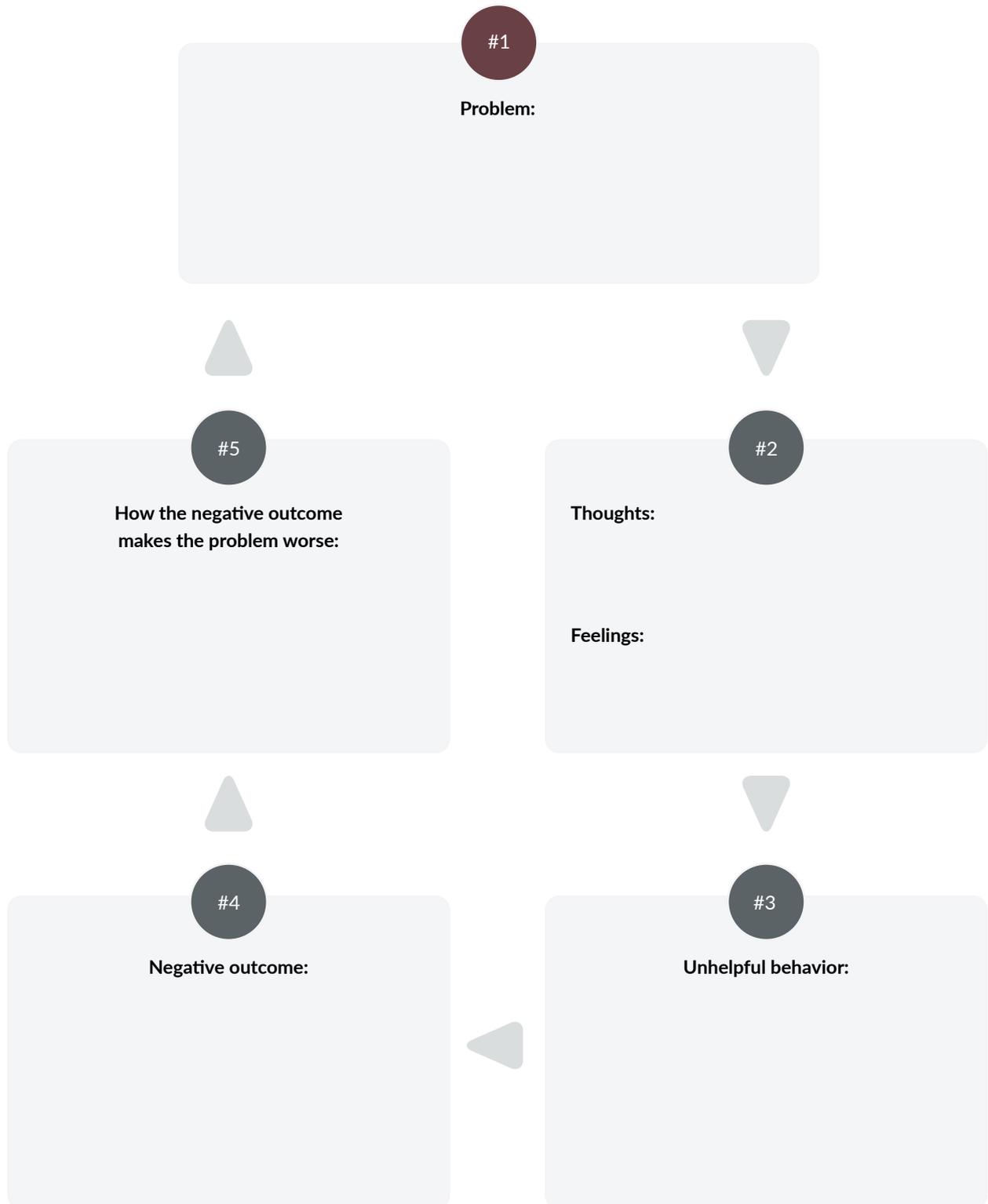
How do the positive outcomes you described in the previous step improve the problem? Describe the positive influence of these outcomes on your problem in box #5 in Appendix B.

Part D: Starting your healthy cycle

The next step is to give this new activity a go. Take a moment to think about your week ahead and find the time for this new healthy activity. Please complete the following sentence:

To break my vicious cycle, I will _____ (describe activity) _____
by _____ (date).

Appendix A: My Vicious Cycle



Appendix B: Breaking My Vicious Cycle

