

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: A Quick Summary

The basic idea of cognitive therapy is that your thinking determines your quality of life. If you change your thinking, you will improve your life. Cognitive therapy is a step-by-step method for identifying your negative thinking and replacing it with healthier thinking. It changes your inner dialogue. Negative thinking can lead to anxiety, depression, and addiction. The most common types of negative thinking are all-or-nothing thinking and focusing on the negatives.

The basic tool of cognitive therapy is the CBT worksheet (or thought record). It is a series of questions that help you review and reflect on your thinking *after the fact*, when you're not reacting out of fear or anger.

Common Types of Negative Thinking

- All-or-Nothing Thinking: "I have to do things perfectly, and anything less is a failure."
- Focusing on the Negatives: "Nothing goes my way. It feels like one disappointment after another." A variation is being overly judgmental: "The world is falling apart. I don't like what I see around me."
- Negative Self-Labeling: "I'm a failure. If people knew the real me, they wouldn't like me. I am flawed."
- Catastrophizing. "If something is going to happen, it'll probably be the worst case scenario."
- Excessive Need for Approval: "I can only be happy if people like me. If someone is upset, it's probably my fault."
- Mind Reading: "I can tell people don't like me because of the way they behave."
- Should Statements: "People should be fair, and when they are not they should be punished."
- Disqualifying the Present: "I'll relax later. But first I have to rush to finish this."
- Dwelling on the Past. "If I dwell on why I'm unhappy and what went wrong, maybe I'll feel better."
- Pessimism. "Life is a struggle. I don't think we are meant to be happy. I don't trust people who are happy. If something good happens in my life, I usually have to pay for it with something bad."

CBT Worksheet - Thought Record Example

There are 10 steps to a worksheet. The first six steps help you understand your negative thinking and where it came from. The next four steps help you come up with healthier thinking and incorporate it into your life.

1. The situation. Briefly describe the situation that led to your unpleasant feelings. This will help you remember the situation later if you review your notes.

I said something wrong at a social event. I felt embarrassed and later I felt anxious thinking about it.

2. Initial thought. What thought first crossed your mind? This was probably a subconscious or automatic thought that you have had before.

I feel like a failure. I worry that people will judge me. I hate that I feel this way, and that I'm always making dumb mistakes.

3. Consider the consequences. Why do you want to change your thinking? Consider the short-term and long-term consequences if you don't change? Look at the psychological, physical, professional, and relationship consequences.

If I continue to think like this, and beat myself up, I will feel miserable. My negativity might affect my relationships and possibly my health. If I continue to think I'm a failure, I will lose my self-respect and start to act like a failure.

4. Challenge your initial thought. How successful has this thinking been for you in the past? What facts do you have that support or challenge your initial thought? What strengths do you have that you may be overlooking? What advice would you give someone else in the same situation?

I feel overwhelmed when I try to be perfect. I'm hard on myself. I don't have to be perfect. People who always beat themselves up are boring. I prefer people who are kind to themselves. Other people make mistakes and it's not a big deal. I am not this critical of them.

5. [Optional] Negative thinking. Summarize the kind of negative thinking behind your initial thought. Identify one or more of the basic types of negative thinking: All-or-nothing, Focusing on the negatives, Catastrophizing, Negative self-labelling, Excessive need for approval, Mind reading, Should statements.

I was self-labeling and focusing on the negatives. I was mind-reading that people dislike me.

6. [Optional] Background. When did you first have initial thoughts like this? How deep do the roots go? Do you know anyone else who thinks like this? How successful has this thinking been for them?

I can hear the voice of my parent saying that I'm a failure and that I'll never amount to anything.

7. Alternative thinking. Now that you understand your negative thinking, look for a healthier way of thinking about the situation. How could you have handled it differently?

I don't have to be perfect. Nobody is. I have some strengths that people appreciate. I want to get rid of this negative thinking. I feel better when I am kind to myself.

8. Positive belief and affirmation. Write down an affirmation, in a positive form, that reflects your healthier approach. Choose something that you can use as a reminder.

Everybody makes mistakes. Be kind to yourself.

9. Action plan. What can you do if this situation arises again? How can you prepare for the situation? Write a list of strengths you bring to the situation? Knowing your tendencies, what can you do if you fall back on old habits?

Before I go into a social setting, I will remind myself that being hard on myself is boring. If I make a mistake, I won't dwell on the negatives. I will remind myself of my past successes. I will remember to be kind to myself and others.

10. Improvement. Do you feel slightly better or more optimistic? This step reinforces the idea that if you change your thinking, you will change your life.

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Reference: "I Want to Change My Life" by Dr. S. Melemis. www.IWantToChangeMyLife.org