

DEPRESSION & STRAIGHT THINKING

THINKING AND DEPRESSION

One of the important effects Depression has on a person is to change the way they think about things. The person with depression has a tendency to look at the negative side of things, to see all the things that have gone wrong in the past and the things that could go wrong in the future. Often the depressed person will think of themselves as guilty or useless and not worthwhile. If this is how you feel, it is important to remind yourself that this way of thinking is a common symptom of depression.

Why is how I think important?

Thinking is the way we make **decisions** about things. People often say “*I need time to think before I decide*“. That is, thinking more often than not helps us decide how to **react** to something.

- If we think something is **safe**, we are more likely to do it.
- If we decide it is **dangerous**, we are more likely to **avoid** doing it.
- If we think something is **good**, we are more likely to feel **happy** about it.
- If we think it is **bad**, we are more likely to feel **sad** about it.

Often, what we are aware of is not how we **think** about things but how we **feel** about them. So how we feel is a good way of working out what we are thinking.

Have you ever wondered why some people react in different ways from others? Why do some things make some people happy and others not? Why does one person become very angry and another person just feels irritated, even though the same thing has happened? Why are some people scared about doing something and other people not so scared, even when both people haven't done it before? You might answer this by saying “*they have a different personality*” or maybe “*something in their childhood*”. This is another way of saying “**people don't always think the same way about things**” and, if they **think** differently about them, they will **feel** differently about them and **do** different things.

So, thinking is a big deal because it is *what decides how you will feel and what you will do*. If it is so important then we better get it **straight**.

What can I do about the way I think?

Because the way you think is extremely important in determining how you feel, then it is worthwhile spending some time and energy making sure that you have good reasons to think the way you do.

The point is not to change your personality or make you a different person, but rather to help you think about things in the same way you used to before you became depressed.

Depression is like a black cloud descending on your life. This cloud makes it difficult for you to see things clearly and your thinking may become slow and confused. Looking at the way you think is an important way you can help to lift that cloud.

Who am I kidding?

This exercise is not about “positive thinking”. You are not expected to try and fool yourself into thinking that life is rosy when you know it isn’t. Although some people do find making positive affirmations useful, most people find this technique doesn’t work very well or for very long.

Realistic Thinking

We know bad things do happen to people. So you will not be expected to feel good about everything. This approach is simply about making sure you are thinking in a realistic way. Making sure that you are not exaggerating or making assumptions about things that have not happened yet. Also it is about making sure you look at the whole picture and not just the dark side.

How do I do it?

The first thing to do is to become more aware of your thoughts. This is probably the hardest part. Our thoughts tend to be so automatic that we are not often aware of what we are thinking. If you ask someone the question, “*What are you thinking about?*” they may answer, “*Nothing*“. This is not the case, we think all the time. (Even dreams are a form of mental activity.)

1) The first step is to work out the subject matter of your thoughts. Ask yourself “*What am I thinking about?*” You may be thinking about your finances or your family or work or something that has happened in the past or may happen in the future.

- On the monitoring sheet provided, write this down under the Situation column.

2) The second step is to listen to your self-talk. “*What am I saying about my finances?*” One way of working out what you are saying, is to listen to your feelings. If you are feeling sad, this is an indication that you are thinking about your finances in a negative way. If you are feeling depressed, this tells you that you are thinking about your finances in a very negative way.

- Write down your thoughts under the Thought column.

3) The third step is to work out how you are feeling.

- Write this down under the Feeling column.

For example:

<i>Situation</i>	<i>Thought</i>	<i>Feeling</i>
1) My financial situation	I’m going broke. We will have to sell the house	Anxious
2) Mistake at work	I’ve stuffed up. It’s all my fault. I’m useless.	Guilty
3) Breaking up with my partner	It’s hopeless. Nothing will ever work out for me. I’ll always be alone.	Depressed

This will take a bit of practice so don’t panic if you don’t get it right the first time. Keep on trying and you’ll get there eventually.

What do I do now?

The next step is to work out how realistic your thinking is. Ask yourself the following questions:

- 1. What evidence do I have to support this way of thinking?**
Or, How do I know this is true? How would I prove it to someone else? Am I taking into account the whole picture? Has it always been this way? How do I know things can never be different? Is there any evidence to contradict this way of thinking?
- 2. Is there an alternative way of thinking about this?**
Would everyone in the same situation think this way? Am I exaggerating the situation? If there were another way to think about this, how would it be better for me? Would I feel less depressed?
- 3. How important is it?**
How will this make a difference, next week, next month, in 5 years time?
- 4. How bad is it?**
Is it the worst thing that could happen? What could I do about it if it did happen? Can the problem be solved or at least made better?

Now try and come up with **an alternative but more accurate thought**, and see if this makes a difference to how you feel.

Here is an example of how this might work.

SITUATION	THOUGHTS	FEELINGS	ACCURATE STATEMENT
1) My financial situation	I'm going broke. We will have to sell the house	Anxious	Things don't look good. I'm going to have to watch my money over the next few months. There might be a way to deal with this better. I'll ring the bank and see if I can work something out with them.
2) Mistake at work	I've stuffed up. It's all my fault. I'm useless.	Guilty	It's not the first mistake I've made and it probably won't be the last. Making mistakes does not make me useless it just makes me normal. My boss doesn't seem to be too concerned about it. I have to remember I'm not feeling my usual self. I'll try and concentrate on one thing at a time. If I continue to make mistakes I might have to ask for some help.
3) Breaking up with my partner	It's hopeless. Nothing will ever work out for me. I'll always be alone.	Depressed	This relationship was very important to me. Losing it is very painful. It's natural for me to feel this way for now but I really can't be sure that I won't find anyone else. Many people break up and end up being happy with someone else. Maybe this relationship wasn't as good as I thought it was.

You will notice that the thoughts in the alternative statement column are still not positive. There is no attempt to hide the fact that a mistake has been made, a relationship lost or lack of money. What is happening is an attempt to keep things in perspective. You may still feel sad even after coming up with a realistic alternative statement but that is OK.

There is a big difference between sadness and depression. When you feel sad you can still work towards finding a solution to your problems but when you are depressed, you can often feel paralysed with no where to go.

So remember don't just come up with some positive thought, which you don't believe in. Pretending is not going to help you feel any better.

Common Unhelpful Thinking Habits

People with depression often make a number of thinking mistakes. Here are examples of some of the most common mistakes.

Black and White/ All or Nothing Thinking:

- Seeing things as good or bad with no middle ground.
- Seeing things as perfect or a total failure with nothing in between.

Focusing on the Negatives/ Making Mountains out of Molehills:

- Concentrating on unpleasant things or mistakes and forgetting everything else that happened – especially the things that went well and what you achieved. Sometimes you might exaggerate something out of all proportion or even turn a positive experience into a negative one.

Setting Unrealistic Expectations:

- Asking yourself to be perfect and not allowing yourself to make mistakes. This way of thinking encourages you to feel like a failure when you do make mistakes (which is only human) and discourages you from trying anything new, which makes it hard for you to get a sense of achievement.

Taking Responsibility for Other People's Feelings/ It's all my fault:

- Worrying about upsetting people, pretending other people are so fragile they will not be able to cope with their own feelings. Not giving other people the chance to decide to get upset or not. Making decisions for them as if they had no say in it. Deciding it is all your fault and forgetting other things, which have nothing to do with you, happen to people and that it takes two to tango.

Fortune Telling/ Mind Reading:

- Pretending you can read into the future or tell what people are thinking about you. This thought usually starts with the words “**What if...**” This is like gambling: sometimes you will be right but most of the time you will be wrong: you will have worried over nothing.

Jumping to Conclusions:

- Not checking things out before you come to a negative conclusion about something.

See if you can identify any of these thinking errors in your thinking.

Remember errors in thinking are another very common symptom of depression. It doesn't mean you are stupid: it just means you are depressed.

Your doctor will help you identify your unhelpful thoughts and help you generate some more realistic statements.

By working on your thoughts you will be able to work towards lifting the cloud of depression and becoming your old self again.

Have a go!