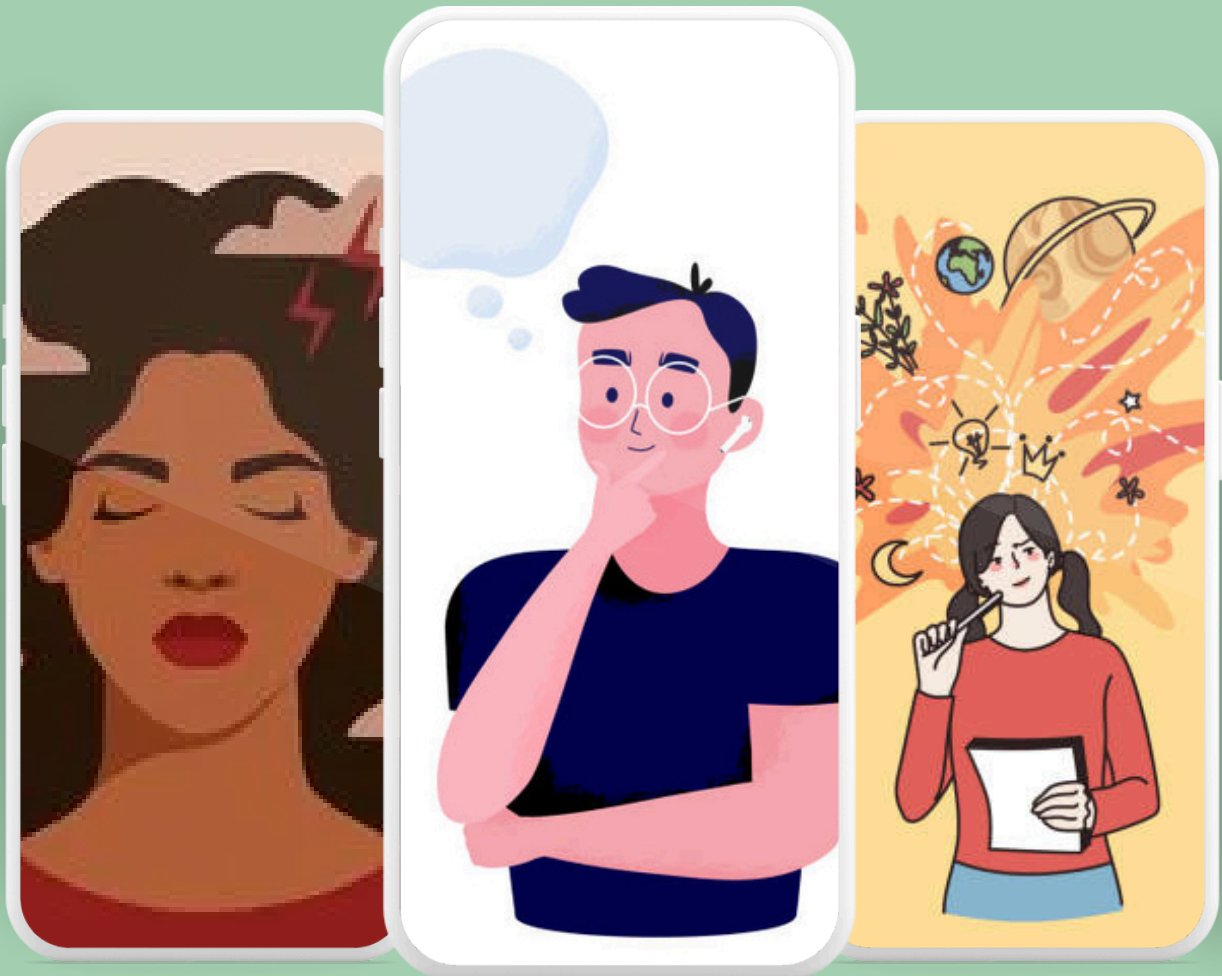




CHANGING YOUR THINKING

How to address distressing thoughts for long-term change



Welcome!



ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

The purpose of this booklet is to support you to understand more about any distressing thoughts you may have, and how to address them.

We hope that this booklet will be useful for you in learning more about how to change your thinking.

What are Distressing Thoughts?

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Thoughts that cause distress can take many forms. Often they are biased perspectives we have on ourselves and the world around us. They can be irrational thoughts and beliefs that we unknowingly reinforce over time. They can also include assumptions and rules that we hold dearly or have decided we must live by. Sometimes these rules or assumptions help us to stick to our values or our moral code, but often they can limit and frustrate us.

These patterns and systems of thought are often subtle and difficult to recognise. This is especially true when they are a regular feature of your day-to-day thoughts. That is one reason why these distressing thoughts can cause distress and anxiety - it's difficult to change something if you don't recognise the thoughts as something that needs to change.



How to Change Distressing Thoughts

First, it's important to identify what distressing thoughts you experience before implementing any of the strategies in this booklet.

Try to keep track of what thoughts cause you distress - this could be thoughts that make you feel anxious or stressed. Keeping a journal may be helpful to do this.

Try to notice any patterns in the distressing thoughts you experience - are you often in crowded environments when you get these thoughts? Are these thoughts associated with a particular activity, like class presentations or travelling on public transport? Noticing these patterns will help you identify the distressing thought itself.

Then, when you have identified the distressing thought, you can try one or both of the strategies detailed below:



1. Change the Unhelpful Conclusion to a Helpful One

Distressing thoughts can often lead us to make unhelpful or critical conclusions about ourselves, or the situation we find ourselves in. If you notice that a distressing thought has led you to one of these conclusions, it can be useful to practice replacing this conclusion with something more helpful to you. This is an important part of changing how we think. Replacing negative, distressing thoughts with alternatives is likely to reduce your distress and enable you to choose more helpful behaviour.

Below are some common self-criticisms and the more helpful, motivational self-talk that could be used instead. Notice that what is important about the motivational self-talk, is that it separates your behaviour of not getting something done, from who you are as a person and your personal qualities (i.e., the behaviour of not starting a task, does not mean a person possesses the quality of laziness). Also, the motivational self-talk focuses on what can be done from here on in, rather than dwelling on what hasn't been done. You can't change the past, but you can change the now and the future. Finally, the more motivational self-talk gets rid of "I have to", "I should" and "I must", replacing them with things like "I choose", "I would prefer", "I will".



Self-Critical Self-Talk	Motivational Self-Talk
I have to get this done. Suck it up and get going loser!	I choose to work on this task. I know I can get it done if I just focus on one thing at a time.
I should be finished by now. If I can't even do this I must be a real idiot!	I would prefer to be finished by now. But let's focus on what I can do to get closer to the finish line.
I must finish this. Come on stupid...think!	I will finish this. It is just going to take a bit more time. Let's plan how to get it done.
I can't believe I haven't started yet. I must be so lazy!	Just focus on getting started. Just because I haven't started, doesn't mean anything bad about me.
Common on! Others can get it done faster than this – I must be a complete moron!	What others do is of no concern. Focusing on what I am doing and my task is more helpful.

For each negative conclusion or self-criticism you notice, find a more helpful way of talking to yourself. Use the examples above to give you some ideas.

If you struggle with thinking of something encouraging to say to yourself, imagine that a friend of yours was using these self-criticisms on themselves, and write down what you would say to them if you were trying to help them. We are often good at being motivational and encouraging towards others, but less good at doing it for ourselves. So, the aim is to practice talking to and treating ourselves as we would a friend.

There are three steps that may support you with developing more helpful thoughts. These are:

1. **Acknowledge the Message**

Typically, when we experience negative or distressing automatic thoughts, there can be an element of truth to the thought, even if the way the thought is being expressed is unhelpful or distressing. For example, imagine that you are feeling anxious about a job interview and are overthinking the questions you may be asked. While this is an unpleasant experience for you, it is true that there are elements of a job interview that are unpleasant. This may be the message that your brain is trying to send to you; being in a job interview is unpleasant, and you might not be looking forward to it. It is important to acknowledge that this message.

2. **Review the Evidence**

Negative distressing thoughts, self-criticisms and cognitive distortions are often not based on rational evidence. Typically, they are based on assumptions or conclusions that we have jumped to. Imagine that you are at a party, and you look across the room and see your friend looking at you. They then turn to someone else and laugh. You may feel very strongly that they are speaking about or laughing about you, and this may be distressing. But what evidence is there that they are in fact speaking about or laughing at you? What other reasons for their behaviour are there?

It is important to review the evidence, or lack of evidence, that you have to support your conclusion. What things do you definitely know to be true, and what is conjecture? Is there evidence that you are misinterpreting? Are you basing the conclusion on how you feel rather than what you know to be true?



3. Plan an Action

All emotions come with “action urges”, or, the urge to do something that happens alongside the emotion. This is part of the evolutionary function of emotions. For example, when you are happy, you may smile or laugh. When you are sad, you may cry. When you are angry, you may become defensive or lash out. Often, these are not actions that people put conscious thought into; they just happen. This is related to the action urge associated with that emotion.

If your distressing thought causes stress or anxiety, it is likely that you will experience an action urge alongside this. However, with things like stress and anxiety, it is sometimes unclear that action it is best to take. For example, if you are anxious that people may look at you while walking on the street, what can you do about it now? This may create difficulties for a person; if an action urge occurs, but there is no action to take, they may feel frustrated or irritable, or they may overfocus on whatever distressing thoughts accompanied the action urge.

Because of this, it may be useful for you to come up with a plan ahead of time to manage the action urge by deliberately taking an action. For example, this could be giving yourself some time to worry and then thinking about something else when the time is up, taking a walk or talking to someone else about the concern.

When you put these steps together, a more helpful thought may look something like this:

- Original thought: My friends are laughing at me.
- More helpful thought: I am worried that they're laughing at me; however, I know my friends well and that would be unusual for them to do; I'm going to talk to them about it.

Once you have come up with more helpful thoughts, it is important to use them as often as you can. Whenever you notice yourself having the original distressing thought, try consciously to replace it with the new, more helpful thought. Over time, you will become more accustomed to the newer helpful thought.

What distressing thoughts do you experience?

Write down some examples here:

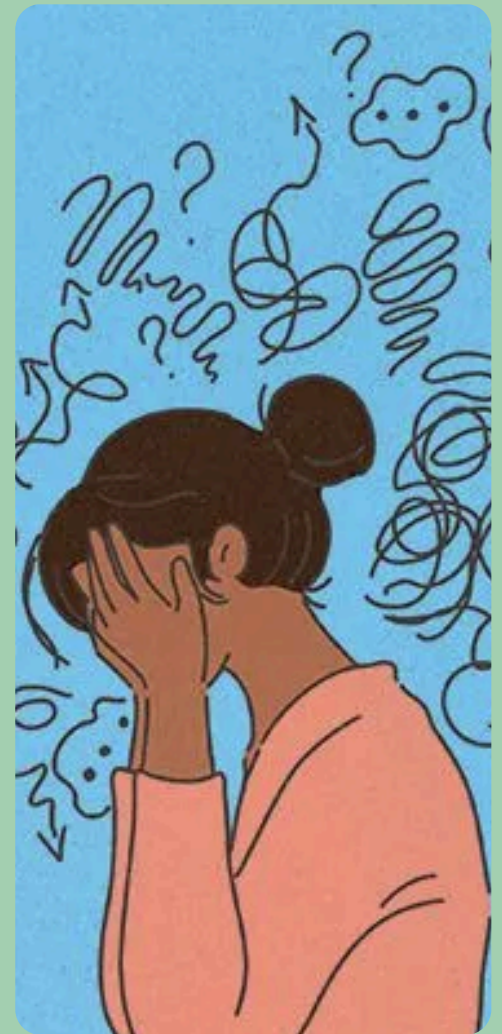
How could you make the thought more helpful?

Write down some ideas here:

2. Socratic Questioning

The Socratic method is often described as the cornerstone of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). It involves asking a series of focused, open-ended questions that encourage reflection. This technique can help us to develop new perspectives on our own thoughts and actions and support us to become aware of and modify processes that perpetuate stress and distress. The subsequent shift in perspective and the accompanying re-evaluation of information and thoughts can be hugely beneficial.

Socratic questioning begins by – you guessed it – asking questions! Take some time to ask yourself some questions about the thought. It's important that these questions be open-ended, and that you really try to think objectively about the answer. Some people benefit from imagining that they are a scientist in a lab, studying the thought, or that the thought is on trial, and they are questioning the thought in that context.



Sample Questions Include:

- Is the thought true?
- Is the thought helpful?
- Is the thought important?
- Is the thought necessary?
- Is the thought kind?
- What evidence is there that this thought is true?
- Is this thought based on an assumption?
- Am I basing this thought on facts or feelings?
- Am I misinterpreting the evidence?
- Am I looking at all the evidence, or just the evidence that supports my conclusion?
- Am I having this thought out of habit?
- Is this the only possible explanation?
- When I don't feel so tired/hungry/stressed what do I think about this?
- Have I considered both sides of the story?
- Do I have all the facts?
- Did someone pass this thought onto me? Are they a good source?
- Is my thought a likely scenario, or is it the worst scenario?
- What would I tell a friend?
- What would a friend tell me?
- Is there anything in the environment that would impact or cause this thought?
- Is there anything in my history that would impact or contribute to this thought?
- Is there anything in the situation that I'm in that would impact or contribute to this thought?
- Is there anything happening for the other person in this situation, or anything in their history, that could explain their behaviour, other than the conclusion I've come to?

Socratic Questioning

Useful Tips



You don't have to ask yourself every one of these questions – some questions will only be appropriate in certain circumstances or situations, and sometimes you won't have time to ask a lot of questions. It is a good idea however to read through the above list of questions and ask yourself at least 3-5 when encountering a stressful thought. This will help you to evaluate if the thought is based in a cognitive distortion, how much the thought is worth listening to, and will help you challenge that thought pattern in the future.

What questions do you think it might be useful to ask yourself?

Write down some ideas here: