Managing Negative or Unhelpful Thoughts

In Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, we give particular focus to the pattern, force, frequency and content of negative or unhelpful thinking. Thoughts play a key role in determining how we feel and what we do. If we interpret a situation negatively, it can profoundly influence the way we react. We have all experienced situations where we have misinterpreted or misunderstood something, reacted in an unhelpful manner and then found that we had applied distorted, unhelpful or faulty thinking to the situation.

Making mistakes in how we read and interpret situations is part of normal human behaviour. We are not programmed to get everything completely right all of the time. The world is a complex place, situations are often difficult to predict and not everything is in our control.

The problem arises when we automatically think in unhelpful patterns that lead to negative feelings and behaviours, where our thoughts generate unrealistic or catastrophic outcomes, where we get trapped in a vicious cycle of negative appraisals and where we are unable to maintain a balanced and realistic perspective. These negative thinking patterns can become reflexive and engrained, leading to unwanted negative emotions such as anxiety or depression. In turn, this can maintain counter-productive and self-defeating patterns of behaviour, as we attempt to control or avoid our unwanted thoughts and feelings.

So How Do Thoughts Work?

In this CBT booklet, we will discover how thoughts are structured and organised in layers, how different types of thinking errors contribute to emotional distress and unwanted behaviours and how changing or letting go of unhelpful thinking patterns can change the way we feel and act.

Layers of Cognition

We can describe negative cognitions or thoughts on four levels; > Negative Automatic Thoughts > Irrational Rules > Dysfunctional Assumptions > Negative Core Beliefs. These four layers of thinking act like the lenses of a telescope through which we view ourselves, the world and the future. This is sometimes referred to as a personal schema. These unhelpful thinking patterns or schema can lead to distressing emotions and unhelpful behaviours, as we act out, struggle with or attempt to avoid negative thoughts. Changing the pattern of thinking or changing our relationship with our thoughts can profoundly shape the way we feel and behave.

Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATS)

NATS are fleeting automatic thoughts that can be explicit or at the very edge of our conscious awareness. They form an internal monologue that can negatively influence how we automatically interpret situations, react and feel. Some typical examples include:

- I can't cope.
- They don't like me.
- They are stupid.
- I will fail.
- It's not fair.
- I look weird

Irrational Rules

Irrational rules are strict thinking principles that tend to be all or nothing, rigidly applied and rarely challenged in daily life. They form an automatic procedure for interpreting situations and are often based on unrealistic standards and demands. Irrational rules are often formed through early experiences where they may have made perfect sense but provide inflexible and unhelpful demands in later life. Examples include:

- I must always work hard.
- People can't be trusted.
- I should always be strong.
- There is no point trying.
- I will ultimately fail.
- I should not be anxious.

Dysfunctional Assumptions

Dysfunctional assumptions are learned suppositions that over time form a reflexive way of interpreting and applying meaning in different situations. They are usually conditional statements that provide a bridge between core beliefs and other negative thoughts. They act as an automatic formula for interpreting or reacting to situations. Examples include:

- If I am criticised, then it proves I am no good.
- If I make a mistake, then I am a failure.
- If it's not perfect, then it's not good enough.
- If I don't get attention, I am unwanted or disliked.
- If I can't think of something interesting to say, people will think I am boring.
- If I am not in control, then something bad will happen.

Negative Core Beliefs

Negative core beliefs are fundamental, absolutist and generalized beliefs that we hold about ourselves, other people, the world and the future. Core beliefs can be divided into three broad categories covering Helplessness, Lovability and Worthlessness:

Helplessness Core Beliefs

- I am inadequate, ineffective, incompetent, can't cope.
- I am vulnerable, weak, needy, a victim, likely to be hurt.
- I am inferior, a failure, a loser, defective, not good enough.

Unlovability Core Beliefs

- I am unlikable, unwanted, will be rejected or abandoned, always be alone.
- I am undesirable, ugly, unattractive, boring, have nothing to offer.
- I am different, flawed, defective, not good enough to be loved by others.

Worthlessness Core Beliefs

- I am worthless, unacceptable, bad, crazy, broken, nothing, a waste.
- I am hurtful, dangerous, toxic, evil.
- I don't deserve to live

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Compensatory Strategies

Compensatory strategies form the link between our thoughts and the action or behaviours we take. These strategies or action tendencies basically tell us how to behave when our negative cognitions are activated. Compensatory strategies can be under-developed leading to patterns of avoidance, or over-developed, leading to strategies of control. Examples include:

- Attend to the problem by worrying about it.
- Seek approval, ask for reassurance or people please.
- Continuously check or examine things to reduce uncertainty.
- Procrastinate, avoid or withdraw.
- Over prepare / apply perfectionist standards.
- Blame, criticise or attack.

The above material briefly illustrates how different layers of negative thinking are organised and structured into Schema. This is a way of presenting the architecture or structure of our thoughts.

Our thoughts are also subject to a number of common thinking errors or distortions. The following section focuses on how our attention, perception, interpretation and evaluations can be influenced by these thinking errors and distortions:

Cognitive Errors and Distortions

We are evolved to use a number of cognitive filters, processes and short-cuts to handle the multitude of stimuli, signals and demands made by our environment. These common cognitive processes are subject to distortions or processing errors when we are exposed to maladaptive learning, are placed under pressure or experience distress.

The following categories are not exhaustive; however, they provide some common examples of how we can slip into thinking errors that maintain negative emotions and unwanted behaviours.

Mental Filter

We take the negative details and magnify them while filtering out all positive aspects of the situation. For example, we may pick out a single unpleasant detail and dwell on it exclusively so that our idea of reality becomes darkened or distorted.

Polarized / Dichotomous / Black and White Thinking

In polarized thinking, things are either "black-or-white." We have to be perfect or we are a failure: there is no middle ground. We place people or situations in "either/or" categories, with no shades of grey, allowing for the complexity of most people and situations. If our performance falls short of perfect, we see ourselves as a complete failure.

Overgeneralization

We come to a general conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens only once, we expect it to always happen in future. We may see a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat.

Jumping to Conclusions

Without individuals saying so, we just know what they are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, we are able to determine how people are feeling toward us. For example, we may conclude that someone is reacting negatively toward us but we do not actually find out if they are correct. Another example is where we anticipate that things will turn out wrong and we are completely convinced that our prediction is already an established fact.

Catastrophizing

We expect disaster to strike, no matter what. This is also referred to as "magnifying or minimizing." We hear about a problem and use what if questions (e.g., "What if tragedy strikes?" "What if something terrible happens to me?"). For example, we might exaggerate the importance of insignificant events (such as our own mistake, or someone else's achievement). We may inappropriately shrink the magnitude of significant events until they appear inconsequential, for example, our own desirable qualities or someone else's imperfections.

Personalization

We believe that everything others do or say is some kind of direct personal reaction. We also compare ourselves to others trying to determine who is brighter, better looking, wittier, etc. When we engage in personalization, we may also see ourselves as the cause of some unhealthy external event that we were not actually responsible for. For example, "We were late for dinner and caused our friend to overcook the meal. If I had only pushed my partner to leave on time, this would not have happened."

Blaming

We hold other people responsible for our pain, or default to blaming ourselves for every problem. We assume that every problem has to be personally attributed to ourselves or someone else.

Shoulds / Musts / Demands

We hold rigid rules about how people should or should not behave, or how things must or must not turn out. People who break the rules make us angry or hurt and we often feel personally guilty or a failure when we violate these rules ourselves. For example, "I really should exercise. I should not be so lazy. They cannot or must not treat me this way."

Emotional Reasoning

We believe that what we feel must be true. If we feel stupid and boring, then in fact we must be stupid and boring. We assume that our unhealthy emotions reflect the way things are in reality. For example, "I feel it, therefore it must be true."

Global Labelling

We generalize individual qualities or characteristics into a negative global judgment. These are extreme forms of generalizing and are also referred to as "labelling" and "mislabelling." For example, using a label ('stupid', 'useless driver') to describe behaviour and then imputing all the meanings the label carries.

Always Being Right

We are continuously attempting to demonstrate or prove that our opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and we will go to any lengths to demonstrate that we are right, and others are wrong. Winning the argument becomes more important than the original point or the impact it has on the situation.

Control Fallacies

If we feel externally controlled, we see ourselves as a helpless victim of fate. For example, "I cannot help it if the quality of the work is poor, my boss demanded I work overtime on it." The fallacy of internal control has us assuming responsibility for the pain and happiness of everyone around us. For example, "Why aren't you happy? Is it because of something I did?"

Fairness Fallacies

We feel resentful because we think we can decide what is fair, but other people won't agree with us. As our parents tell us, "you should always be fair." The problem with this is that we then turn this around to demand that we should always feel fairly treated ourselves. People who go through life applying a measuring rule to judge "fairness" often feel negative and resentful because of what they see as a breach of the standards they demand. Feeling negative and resentful does not change whether something is or is not fair.

Change Fallacies

We expect that other people will change to suit us if we just pressurise, cajole or manipulate them enough. We believe that we need to change people because our hopes for happiness seem to depend entirely on them.

Reward Fallacies

We expect our sacrifice and self-denial to ultimately pay off and be acknowledged, as if someone is keeping score. We feel bitter if we are not recognised or rewarded.

Summary

The above cognitive errors or distortions are experienced by most people at some point. These errors become more of a problem when they are applied automatically and form a reflexive way of framing situations or reacting to challenges.

The purpose of cognitive work in CBT, is to identify, assess and alter negative thinking patterns, so that we can experience a healthier emotional reaction, feel better and act in a way that is consistent with our goals and values.

Always ask yourself:

What do I notice about my thoughts - step back and just observe what's happening? How does thinking this way help me? What's a more realistic interpretation? Are these just thoughts? Am I really defined by my thoughts? Can I Tolerate the uncertainty and discomfort - make the NATs less relevant? Shift my focus on to helpful and rational things.