

CHANGE YOUR THINKING – CHANGE YOUR LIFE

A Thought Record is a useful self-assessment to show how irrational or ineffective thoughts are effecting your mood, behavior, and physiological reactions to events in your life. These thoughts (inner dialogue, memories and mental images) are often 'automatic' because they come into our minds so quickly we are not totally aware of them. By tracking these automatic thoughts, we can learn to dispute them with more rational and objective thoughts, which can improve our mood and responses.

This is the basic idea behind Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) however, it is not enough to just think happy thoughts. It requires cognitive restructuring to clear out the clutter of unhelpful thoughts, and then specific problem solving skills, new actions and behaviors may need to be introduced.

USING THE THOUGHT RECORD

When you are having an unpleasant emotion, stop and write down what is happening. By keeping a daily journal of events, thoughts, moods and behaviors, you can see how your automatic negative thoughts are effecting you, then dispute them with rational arguments. In this manner, you can use your own internal conversation, as realistic and objective as possible, to improve your mood, behavior, and physical reactions to events.

- The Thought Record can help you:
- Identify Irrational and Negative Thoughts
- Highlight the thought–feeling–behavior sequence
- Introduce more realistic thoughts
- Change your negative responses to events.
- Fill in each area on the Thought Record:

Activating Event – What happened to trigger your thoughts, feelings and behavior.

Belief – Any thoughts, personal meaning or visual images you attributed to the situation.

Consequence – Describe your reactions in the following areas:

- Feeling – what emotional reaction occurred
- Behavior – what did you do or not do
- Physiological – what bodily reaction resulted at the time

Then ask yourself “when I had this feeling, what was I thinking about?” Do the same for your behavior and your physiological response. Then put these thoughts back in “Beliefs.” This will detect more automatic negative thoughts.

Example

Activating Event

I went to work and the boss walked by, looking angry, and did not say good morning as he passed me.

Beliefs

“He must be upset with me!” |

“I must have done something wrong!”

“He’s gonna be a real terror today!”

Consequence

- Affect: Anxiety was pretty high, I rated it a 7.
- Behavior: I avoided him the rest of the day.
- Physical: I was tense, and could not eat lunch.

Irrational Beliefs Create:

- Unhealthy emotions and self-defeating behavior
- Low frustration tolerance
- Biased critiques about:
 - Yourself (self esteem)
 - Thoughts about what others think of us (Social approval)
 - Thoughts about others (expectations and judgments)
 - Thoughts about future behaviors (coping strategies)
- Disputing an irrational thought or belief

After identifying the Activating event, Beliefs and Consequences, use the Thought Record to dispute your self-defeating, irrational beliefs, then replace them with more realistic, goal focused thoughts. By Disputing and challenging your NATs, or self-defeating irrational beliefs, you can greatly reduce the emotional and physical consequences of negative thinking. This will help you discover more realistic, positive thoughts that will propel your actions and improve your mood (Effect).

Dispute – Challenge unhelpful thoughts contributing to the negative emotional and physical consequences.

Effect – Describe the new effect and response.

- Feeling – How do I feel now?
- Behavior – What positive action can I take?
- Physiological – What bodily reaction am I having?

Example:

Dispute

“What evidence can I draw upon?” – I only know that he looked mad and walked by.

“Am I blaming myself for something that I am not sure is my fault?” – Yes I am just blaming myself without any evidence.

“When I felt differently, would I act differently about this situation?” – Yes, if I wasn’t so anxious, I would ask him about this interaction to learn more about why he looked angry.

Effect

- Affect: Anxiety not as high, now it’s about a 3.
- Behavior: I will talk to my boss and check out my assumptions with him.
- Physical: I am not as tense, I was able to eat lunch.

Disputes to Challenge Irrational Beliefs:

- Can I rationally support this belief?
- What evidence can I draw upon?
- Has this been true in other situations?
- Are there any experiences I have had that contradict this thought?
- Am I thinking that my current feelings are “facts”?
- Has my behavior (such as avoiding) reinforced my belief?
- Am I only noticing the negative aspects?
- Am I expecting something to be perfect?
- What are the pros and cons of thinking this thought?
- What would I tell a friend if they were thinking like this?
- What would friend say about this?
- Is my way of looking at things the only way?
- Am I blaming myself for something that is not my fault?
- Am I judging myself more harshly than I would judge others?
- What are the pros and cons of thinking this thought?
- Am I making any thinking errors? (see irrational beliefs sheet)
- Do I often think like this when upset?
- When I felt differently, would I act differently about this situation?
- Are there any experiences I have had that contradict this thought?
- Can I be more self accepting and compassionate?

Rational Thinking Encourages:

- Healthy emotions and behaviors
- Preferences rather than demands
- Flexibility and high frustration tolerance

By disputing our irrational beliefs we are able to:

- Unblock our emotions and feelings.
- Become productive, realistic problem solvers.
- See the importance, magnitude, and probability of the problem to be solved.
- See our feelings as separate, and not “caused” by the problem.
- Gain our sense of humor about our thoughts and problems.
- Recognize our self-worth, separate from the mistakes we may have made.
- Forgive ourselves and others for mistakes made.

By seeing the situation isn't quite as bad as you imagined, you can free up better coping and problem solving skills. If it is as bad as imagined, it can help to 'face the worst' and plan a way to deal with it.

Once the Effect is more tolerable, you can then decide on the best response for this situation and similar events to come. After considering possible strategies, it is important to choose one and test it out. If it proves to be ineffective, then try a different strategy.

It may be necessary to learn a new skill, such as being more assertive. New responses come in many forms, such as developing hobbies or interests, social supports, spirituality or specific coping skills such as the ability to self-soothe, or delay gratification. By practicing a new response, this too can improve your mood and overall outlook on life.