

The basic idea of cognitive therapy is that your thinking determines your mood, and if you change your thinking, you will change your life. Cognitive therapy helps you identify your negative thinking and replace it with healthier thinking.

The most common types of negative thinking are all-or-nothing thinking and disqualifying the positives. If you think that things have to be perfect and anything less than perfect is a failure, you're setting yourself up for trouble. If you focus on the few negatives in your life and disqualify the many positives, you're more prone to anxiety, depression, and addiction.

The basic tool of cognitive therapy is the thought record. It is a journal in which you write down your negative thoughts and analyze them step-by-step. It gives you the chance to reflect on your thinking *after the fact*, when you're not reacting out of fear or resentment, and a systematic approach to come up with healthier alternatives.

Here are some common types of negative thinking:

- All-or-Nothing Thinking: "I have to do things perfectly because anything less is a failure."
- Disqualifying the Positives: "Nothing goes my way. I don't like my life. It feels like one disappointment after another." A variation is being overly judgmental: "Things aren't like they used to be. The world is falling apart. People aren't nice any more."
- 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 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."
- Emotional Reasoning: "If I feel this way, then it must be true."
- Mind Reading: "I can tell people don't like me because of the way they behave."
- Should Statements: "People should be nice to me." "Life should be fair."
- Disqualifying the Present: "I'll relax later. But first I have to rush to finish this."
- Dwelling on Pain. "If I dwell on why I'm unhappy and think about what went wrong, maybe I'll feel better." "If I worry enough about my problem, maybe I will 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."

There are 10 steps to a thought record. The first six steps guide you through understanding 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. Write a thought record about unpleasant experiences that you would like to have handled differently. You can write about past or current experiences. Start with easy ones at first. Wait until you are more practiced before dealing with more uncomfortable experiences.

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

I made a mistake at work. I felt anxious and was reminded of past failures.

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. If people knew the real me, they wouldn't like me.

3. Negative thinking. Identify the negative thinking behind your initial thought. Choose one or more from the list of common types of negative thinking.

This is self-labeling and disqualifying the positives.

4. Source of negative belief. Can you trace your thinking back to a situation or person? Is there a deep belief or fear driving your thinking? Search your heart.

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

5. Challenge your thinking. Look at the evidence both for and against your thinking. Have you been in a similar situation before? What did you learn from it? What strengths do you bring to this situation? Make sure you see the whole picture.

I'm hard on myself. I don't always succeed, but I do sometimes. People have complimented me on my work. I feel overwhelmed when I try to be perfect.

6. Consider the consequences. What are the short-term and long-term consequences if you continue to think like this? Look at the physical, psychological, professional, and emotional consequences.

I'm damaging my self-esteem. If I continue to think like this, my negativity will affect my relationships and possibly my health. I'll become exhausted.

7. Alternative thinking. The previous steps of the thought record helped you understand your thinking and lower your defenses. Now that you've considered the facts, write down a healthier way of thinking.

I don't have to succeed at everything. I can learn from my mistakes. I'm not a failure. I want to get rid of this negative thinking. I'm being hard on myself.

8. Positive belief and affirmation. Write down a statement that reflects your healthier beliefs. Find something that you can repeat to yourself.

A mistake is not failure. I am successful in many ways.

9. Action plan. What action can you take to support your new thinking?

The next time I make a mistake, I won't dwell on the negatives. Instead I will focus on what I can learn from my mistake. I will remind myself of my past successes.

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 mood. Gradually over time, your thinking and life will begin to improve.

There are no restrictions on the printing of this document. It is provided as a public service by www.CognitiveTherapyGuide.org. For a more complete guide to cognitive therapy refer to the book "I Want to Change My Life" by Dr. Steven M. Melemis.