

Working With Hot Thoughts

Managing Anger

Changing Your Environment

Sometimes it's our immediate surroundings that give us cause for irritation and fury. Problems and responsibilities can weigh on you and make you feel angry at the "trap" you seem to have fallen into and all the people and things that form that trap.

Give yourself a break. Make sure you have some "personal time" scheduled for times of the day that you know are particularly stressful. One example is the working mother who has a standing rule that when she comes home from work, for the first 15 minutes "nobody talks to Mom unless the house is on fire." After this brief quiet time, she feels better prepared to handle demands from her kids without blowing up at them.

Some Other Tips for Easing Up on Yourself

Timing: If you and your spouse tend to fight when you discuss things at night—perhaps you're tired, or distracted, or maybe it's just habit—try changing the times when you talk about important matters so these talks don't turn into arguments.

Avoidance: If your child's chaotic room makes you furious every time you walk by it, shut the door. Don't make yourself look at what infuriates you. Don't say, "well, my child should clean up the room so I won't have to be angry!" That's not the point. The point is to keep yourself calm.

Finding alternatives: If your daily commute through traffic leaves you in a state of rage and frustration, give yourself a project—learn or map out a different route, one that's less congested or more scenic. Or find another alternative, such as a bus or commuter train.

Introduction:

Cognitive Restructuring is a useful tool for understanding and turning around negative thinking. It helps us put unhappy, negative thoughts "under the microscope", challenging them and in many cases rescripting the negative thinking that lies behind them. In doing this, it can help us approach situations in a positive frame of mind.

This is obviously important because not only are negative moods unpleasant for us, they also reduce the quality of our performance and undermine our working and social relationships with other people.

The key idea behind this tool as with the other tools in this section, is that our moods are driven by what we tell ourselves, and this is usually based on our interpretations of our environment. Cognitive Restructuring helps us evaluate how rational and valid these interpretations are. Where we find that these assumptions and interpretations are incorrect, then this naturally changes the way we think about situations and changes our moods.

Cognitive Restructuring is similar to the “Thought Awareness, Rational and Positive Thinking” tool. The Thought Awareness tool is a quick technique that is useful for dealing with spontaneous or simple negative thinking. Cognitive Restructuring can help where issues are more significant.

Using the Tool:

We use the Cognitive Restructuring tool when we find ourselves in a negative mood. These might be times when we are, for example, sad, angry, anxious, or upset.

We may also use it after using a stress diary, when we see that we are frequently experiencing bad moods of a particular type or in particular circumstances.

To use the tool, go through the following steps:

1. **Write down the situation that triggered the negative thoughts:**
Make a brief note of the situation in the first column of the worksheet.
2. **Identify the moods that you felt in the situation:**
In the second column, enter the moods that you feel in the situation. Moods here are the deep feelings that we have about the situation. They are not thoughts about it.

“Mind over Mood” offers an easy trick to help tell moods from thoughts: It is usually possible to express moods in one word, while thoughts are more complex. Keep in mind, you may well feel several different moods at the same time. These reflect different aspects of the situation. For example, “he is trashing my suggestion in front of my co-workers,” would be a thought, while the associated moods might be “humiliated”, “frustrated”, “angry” and “insecure”.

Write down the Automatic Thoughts that you experienced when you felt the mood:

In the third column, write down the thoughts that came into your mind when you felt the mood. Identify the most distressing of these.

In the example above, thoughts might be:

- Maybe my analysis skills aren’t good enough...

- Have I failed to consider these things?
- He hasn't liked me since...
- How rude and arrogant of him!
- Everyone will think badly of me
- But my argument is good and sound...
- This is undermining my future with this company

In this case, the person in this example might consider that the most distressing thoughts (the "Hot Thoughts") are "maybe my analysis skills aren't good enough," and everyone will think badly of me".

Identify the evidence that supports these Hot Thoughts:

In the fourth column of the worksheet, write down the objective evidence that you can find that supports the Hot Thoughts. Developing this example, the evidence written down might have been:

- The meeting moved on and decisions were taken with no account being taken of my suggestion
- He did identify a flaw in one of the arguments in my paper on the subject

Identify the evidence that does not support the Hot Thoughts:

In the next column, write down the objective evidence that contradicts the Hot Thoughts.

Evidence contradicting the Hot Thought in the example might be:

- The flaw was minor and did not alter the conclusions
- The analysis was objectively sound, and the suggestion was realistic and well founded
- When I trained in the analysis method, I usually came close to the top of my class
- My clients respect my analysis and my opinion

Now, identify fair, balanced thoughts about the situation:

By this stage, you will have looked at both sides of the situation as far as you can. This should have clarified the situation. You may now have all the information you need to take a fair, balanced view of the situation.

Alternatively, you may find that there are still substantial points of uncertainty. If this is the case, then you may need to clarify this uncertainty, perhaps by discussing the situation with other people who have a view or by testing the question in some other way. Obviously, the amount of effort you put in does depend on the importance of the situation.

Do what is needed to come to a balanced view and write the balanced thoughts down in the sixth column of the worksheet.

The balanced thoughts in this example might now be:

- I am good at this sort of analysis. Other people respect my abilities.
- My analysis was reasonable, but not perfect
- There was an error; however it did not affect the validity of the conclusions.
- The way he handled the situation was not correct.
- People were surprised and a little shocked by the way he handled my suggestion (this comment would have followed a conversation with other people at the meeting).

Finally, observe your mood now and think about what you are going to do:

You should now have a clearer view of the situation.

Look at your mood now. You will probably find that it has changed and (hopefully!) improved. Write this in the final column.

The next step is to think about what you could do about the situation. You may conclude that no action is appropriate. By looking at the situation in a balanced way, it may cease to be important.

Alternatively, you may choose to do something about the situation. If you do, you may find that some of the techniques are useful. The Assertiveness tool is most likely to be particularly useful in dealing with problems with other people!

Make a note of these actions in the final column, but also put them on your To Do List so that you act on them.

Finally, think through positive affirmations that you can use to counter any future negative thoughts of this type, and see if you can spot any opportunities coming out of the situation.

Concluding the example above:

- **Mood:** Compared with the moods felt at the start of the example, the mood experienced by the person completing the worksheet will have changed. Instead of feeling humiliation, frustration, anger and insecurity, this person is most likely to feel only anger.
- **Actions:** A first action will be to use relaxation techniques to calm the anger. Having done this, this person may take away two actions: First, to check his or her work more thoroughly and second, to arrange a meeting to discuss the situation in an assertive manner.

- **Positive Thoughts:** This person could also create, and use, the following positive thought in a similar situation: *“My opinions are sound and are respected by fair-minded colleagues and clients. I will rise above rudeness.”*

Summary:

Cognitive Restructuring is a useful technique for understanding what lies behind negative thoughts and moods.

To use Cognitive Restructuring, work your way through this process:

- Write down the situation that triggered the negative thoughts
- Identify the moods that you felt in the situation
- Write down the Automatic Thoughts that you experienced when you felt the mood.
- Identify the evidence that supports these Hot Thoughts.
- Identify the evidence that does not support the Hot Thoughts
- Identify the moods that you felt in the situation
- Write down the Automatic Thoughts that you experienced when you felt the mood.
- Identify the evidence that supports these Hot Thoughts.
- Identify the evidence that does not support the Hot Thoughts.
- Now, identify fair, balanced thoughts about the situation.
- Finally, observe your mood now and think about what you are going to do not support the Hot Thoughts.
- Now, identify fair, balanced thoughts about the situation.
- Finally, observe your mood now and think about what you are going to do