

MODULE 5
*Cognitive Strategies for
Managing and Preventing Depression*

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Feelings & Thoughts

People often believe that the feelings and emotions they experience are determined by external events, situations, and the behaviour of others. For example, we may hear ourselves say, “My boss made me so nervous,” “My partner made me so angry,” “This trip down south made me feel so relaxed,” or “I’m depressed because I didn’t get the job I wanted.” What is the assumption underlying these statements? That someone or something other than ourselves was directly determining the feelings we experienced.



We come to these conclusions automatically without asking ourselves if this assumption is true. However, if we stop to analyse the process that links an external situation to our emotional responses, we will find that there is a step in between.

How Our Thoughts Influence Our Feelings

What really makes us feel and respond the way we do, is often not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but how we perceive that situation or that person’s actions. It is how we see something or someone and what we think about it or them that really influences how we feel. It is our thoughts and beliefs about an event that significantly influences our emotions and actions.

Just as we are not always conscious of the way we walk or how we drive a car, we are often not aware of our thinking. Some of our thinking is so habitual that it is automatic, and just like driving, when things are automatic, we might not be conscious of them. Our automatic thoughts, however, play an important role in our emotional well-being.

Here’s an example. Suppose you went to a party and your host introduces you to Mike. As you talk to him, you notice that he does not look directly at you but often looks around the room. How would you feel if you thought, “Boy, this guy is so rude! He won’t even look at me while I’m talking with him! How nasty!” What if you thought, “Mike must think that I’m really unattractive and uninteresting. I must be a really boring person. Nobody wants to talk to me!” What about if you were to think, “Mike’s probably waiting for a friend to come. Maybe he’s getting a bit anxious.” You probably realised that you felt three different emotions as a result of those three different thoughts. Often, we are not aware of our thoughts and beliefs because they are so automatic and happen quickly. But they are there, and they affect the way we feel.

Feelings are not Thoughts

When we first try to distinguish thoughts from feelings, it can be easy to confuse them. We might be used to talking about thoughts and feelings as being part of the same experience, but it is more helpful to separate them and remember that feelings are not thoughts. For example, you might hear a person saying “I *think* I’m anxious,” but they’re probably *thinking* “Everyone will laugh at me,” and *feel* anxious. More commonly, you might hear someone saying something like “I *feel* that my partner doesn’t appreciate the gift I bought for him,” when they are actually *thinking* “My partner doesn’t appreciate the gift I bought for him,” and *feel* hurt.

Try the exercise on the following page and see if you can identify the possible feelings and thoughts in each of the scenarios. Remember to try and make the distinction between thoughts and feelings.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

Part One

Instructions: Read the following scenarios and identify the feelings that may result from the self-statements.

SCENARIO 1:

You've had a rather long and tiring day at work where you were helping a colleague move boxes of stationery and office equipment. You arrive home to find the front door ajar and two sets of muddy footprints (your son's and his dog's) on your cream-coloured carpet leading from the front door all the way to the back door.

A) You say to yourself:

"What! N@!^#*M!! I've had such a tiring day at work and now I come home to this!!!! What have I done to deserve this! We just had the carpet cleaned last week! That naughty boy! All he cares about is himself! That inconsiderate, selfish brat! I'm gonna ground him for 2 years!!!"

Possible Feelings:

B) You say to yourself:

"I've told him a thousand times not to bring the dog into the house and he never listens to me. My kids don't obey even the simplest instructions. I must be the worst mother in the world. If I can't even get this right, I must be a terrible failure."

Possible Feelings:

SCENARIO 2:

One evening, your parents ask you to go over to their house for dinner. As you arrive, you noticed that it was all dark and there were no lights on. You knock on the door and ring the doorbell but no one comes to answer the door. You turn the doorknob and find that the door is unlocked. You step in and find that the house is in total darkness. Suddenly, you hear a chorus of voices shouting, "Surprise!" The lights come on and you see a group of your friends and relatives singing "Happy Birthday" to you.

You say to yourself:

"Wow! I didn't even remember that it was my birthday! What a really nice surprise! Hey, even uncle James and aunt Bertha came and they live in the country! Everyone must think I'm pretty important to throw me this party!"

Possible Feelings:

Part Two

Instructions: Read the following scenarios and now fill in the self-statements that lead to the feelings experienced.

SCENARIO 1:

You arrive home to find a note from your flatmate telling you that they have moved out. You look around and find that everything that belongs to them is gone. Moreover, their share of the rent has not been paid.

A) You say to yourself:

Feelings:

Angry

B) You say to yourself:

Feelings:

Hurt

SCENARIO 2:

You just finished cooking dinner for you and your partner. Your partner calls to say that he/she will not be home for dinner because he/she has to work late.

A) You say to yourself:

Feelings:

Disappointed

B) You say to yourself:

Feelings:

Concerned

IMPROVING HOW YOU FEEL

We've talked about the way our thoughts affect how we feel. If we are feeling happy and excited, chances are we have been thinking positive thoughts and about positive things. On the other hand, if we are feeling anxious, depressed, and upset, it is very likely that we have been thinking negative thoughts. We call these unhelpful thoughts (simply because they lead to unpleasant feelings or unhelpful actions!). All of us, at times, think things that make us feel sad or distressed, and that is a normal part of life. However, if you feel depressed over a period of time, you might need to examine your thinking in order to improve how you feel.



What sorts of thoughts are unhelpful? Unhelpful thoughts are those that tend to focus on the negative aspects of a situation, or those that overestimate the chances of a negative event occurring, or those that place unrealistic demands on yourself or others. These are also often known as unhelpful thinking styles because they are patterns of thinking that have become a habit and contribute to a person feeling unhelpful negative feelings.

What Can I Do?

Plenty! There are lots of things you can do to help yourself feel better, and this next suggestion has been proven to be pretty effective. If unhelpful thoughts lead to distressing emotions, then it might be quite reasonable to say that the most effective thing to do would be to change those unhelpful thoughts to helpful ones! Yeah? Okay, so, how can you do that?

On page 7, a Thought Diary is provided for you to guide you in organising and changing your thoughts. First, write down an event or a situation in which you experienced a strong negative emotion, such as depression. Next, try to identify exactly how or what you felt. Then, ask yourself "What am I thinking? What conclusions am I making?" to see how and why you are feeling distressed. Remember, unhelpful thoughts will lead to you feeling upsetting emotions.

The next step is to challenge your thinking by exploring other possible explanations and looking at a situation from different points of view. You might ask yourself, "What other ways are there of viewing this situation? How might someone else view this situation? What other explanations could there be?"



The final step is to ask yourself, "How can I revise my original thoughts to take into account these other possible viewpoints?" Then, think of an alternative explanation. This becomes your new, balanced, and helpful thought. A balanced and helpful thought or belief is one that takes into consideration alternative viewpoints and helps you feel better. Replace your original, unhelpful thought with this new, balanced, and helpful belief. Once you have done this, you will probably find that you feel better and your mood will be improved.

Below is an example of how you could fill out a thought diary. Each column includes prompts so that you can work through the process easily. Try to be as specific as possible. Then, use the thought diary provided on the next page to work through this process with an example from your own experience.

My Thought Diary

(Example)

What happened?	What was I thinking?	How can I think differently?
<p>This could be an actual event or situation, a thought, mental picture or recollection, leading to unpleasant feelings.</p> <p><i>When my partner came home this evening, she said 'hi' but didn't give me a kiss like she usually does.</i></p>	<p>What thoughts were going through your mind when the event occurred?</p> <p><i>"She must be tired of me moping around and feeling depressed."</i></p> <p><i>"She probably doesn't care about me anymore. Maybe she doesn't even love me anymore."</i></p>	<p>What other ways are there of viewing the situation? What evidence do I have that show that this thought is not completely true all of the time?</p> <p><i>She might have had a difficult day at work and was just feeling tired and distracted.</i></p> <p><i>She might have wanted to put the groceries away or go to the toilet.</i></p>
<p>How did I feel? What did I do?</p> <p>Describe how you feel and include any physical sensations you experience, as well as your actions and behaviour.</p> <p><i>Hurt Afraid</i></p> <p><i>Chest feels tight and sore</i></p>		<p><i>She has been telling me that she understands my struggles and will support me through this period.</i></p>

Note: If you would like more detailed information about the use of cognitive strategies to manage depression, take a look at:

Back from the Bluez.

My Thought Diary

<p>What happened?</p> 	<p>What was I thinking?</p> 	<p>How can I think differently?</p> 
<p>This could be an actual event or situation, a thought, mental picture or recollection, leading to unpleasant feelings.</p>	<p>What thoughts were going through your mind when the event occurred?</p>	<p>What other ways are there of viewing the situation? What evidence do I have that show that this thought is not completely true all of the time?</p>
<p>How did I feel? What did I do?</p>  <p>Describe how you feel and include any physical sensations you experience, as well as your actions and behaviour.</p>		

MODULE SUMMARY

- What really makes us feel and respond the way we do, is not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but our thoughts and beliefs about the situation or person
- If we are feeling depressed, anxious, or upset, it is very likely that we have been thinking negative thoughts. These are called unhelpful thoughts because they lead to unpleasant feelings or unhelpful actions
- Unhelpful thoughts are those that tend to focus on one aspect of a situation (usually a negative aspect), or those that put a negative label on yourself, overestimate the chances of a negative event occurring, or those that place unrealistic demands on yourself, others, or the world
- Use a Thought Diary to help you work through the process of challenging your thoughts
 - ⇒ Write down an event or a situation in which you experienced a strong negative emotion
 - ⇒ Next, identify exactly how or what you felt
 - ⇒ Then, ask yourself “What am I thinking?” to see how and why you are feeling distressed
 - ⇒ Challenge your thinking by exploring other possible explanations and looking at the situation from different points of view
 - ⇒ The final step is to revise your original thoughts and replace them with an alternative and balanced explanation

Keep Going ...

In the next module, we will discuss cognitive changes in mania and look at how cognitive strategies can be used to prevent a full-blown manic episode.