

<sup>1</sup>This booklet will teach you about cognitive therapy; a kind of therapy that can be extremely effective and there is a body of research to prove this.

This booklet will help you to think in new ways about yourself, other people and life in general.

Cognitive therapy is based on the idea that, to quite a large extent, our feelings can be the result of our thoughts. Take the following example: at night you hear a noise in the garden. If you think it is a burglar you will feel frightened. If you think it is a fox you may feel curiosity, if you think it is your cat you may feel contented. In other words, how you interpret an event is the key determinant of how you feel about it.

In our childhoods we acquire ways of thinking about the world and interpreting it. Sometimes these are like whole systems for thinking about ourselves or the world; these

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are called schemata. For example, we may conclude that other people are more intelligent, more attractive and more likeable than we are. When something happens to us as adults we can engage these ways of thinking. For example, if we do not get served right away in a bar we may conclude that we would have caught the intention of the bar staff earlier if we had been more attractive. In this way we can seem to confirm the original ideas we had about ourselves. We are inclined to notice evidence that strengthens these beliefs while we may ignore evidence to the contrary. So, if someone smiles at us on the tube we may ignore the possibility that the person finds us appealing in favour of some other way of looking at the event.

One way of breaking into these vicious circles is by becoming aware of the way in which our thoughts affect our feelings. To do this it is important to keep a record. This enables us to become more aware of what is happening in our own minds, to reflect upon it, to spot patterns and to set about finding ways of thinking and feeling that are more helpful to us. Once we have done this it is important to actually practise catching ourselves thinking in ways that cause anxiety, anger or depression

and to substitute ways of thinking and feeling that will help us to be positive and optimistic. Some people are afraid that if they try to do this they will turn into bland and uninteresting human beings with a fixed and insincere smile on their faces; this need not happen, you are in control of your responses and so you can choose whatever way of thinking and behaving suits you.

However it may well be that you will feel quite uncomfortable during the early stages of using some of the ideas here. This is quite natural. What you will be doing will be unfamiliar to you and so it will be natural to feel initially that you are acting, being insincere and behaving in ways which seem to go against the grain of your personality. With time and practise these feelings will pass as new habits become established. You will find yourself being surprised by new reactions; you may catch yourself refusing to worry about the sort of thing that formally upset you. You will become able to cope in situations which defeated you before and you will be able to deal with people who you used to find difficult and annoying.

To get the full benefit from these ideas it is important to make two further moves. The first is to be prepared to radically question your own philosophy; this may be helping to create your unhappiness. For example if you believe that it is important to always be suspicious of people you may approach others with a tension that puts them on edge and this may create circumstances in which you may not bring out the best in others. Many of our behaviours began life as defensive manoeuvres to save us from pain in our childhood. In adult life, if we maintain the same attitudes we may become our own worst enemies.

The second important move will be to act on our new beliefs. Action helps to solidify and reinforce our new ways of thinking. So, for example, if you have always held back from asking another person for a date it is important at some point to start to take risks of this sort and to deal with the consequences in our heads.

### Automatic thoughts

The phrase automatic thoughts is used by cognitive therapists to describe what we think when we jump to conclusions. Sometimes these thoughts are on the very

edge of consciousness so we are hardly aware we are having them at all. For example when we make a mistake we may exclaim under our breaths "Stupid!" or, when faced with an unfamiliar situation we may think "I can't cope with this". These thoughts may be very fleeting and may even seem just like reflexes. These ways of thinking have been learnt in childhood. Consider, for example, two children who have been taken to the zoo. Each sees an apparently sleepy snake make a sudden movement. The mother of the first child says "Wasn't that exciting?"; her child smiles. The mother of the second child says "Wasn't that scary?", her child looks serious and anxious. Such interactions as these are repeated literally hundreds of thousands of times during an average child's youth and so patterns of thinking become so firmly established that they come to seem like the only possible way to view things. Some of these automatic thoughts take the form of rules such as "I must be perfect", "I should never be angry", "I should never be sad" or "I must always be happy." These thoughts give themselves away by the use of words such as "should", "must" or "have to". Adults often unconsciously try to live up to perfectionist rules that set up unrealistic standards. We often fail to challenge these ideas and rarely look for evidence to confirm or deny them. These sorts of

thoughts appear dangerously plausible; they can be hard to catch because they last only a second or two.

### Downward spirals

We can find ourselves starting with one of these automatic thoughts and then follow them with further thoughts of an equally negative kind. If a partner fails to phone we may instantly feel that this is because the partner does not care about us enough. Soon we can be thinking that we are unlovable and find ourselves experiencing a sense of worthlessness and despair. When we fall into these downward spirals what we need is something to break them and to moderate them but instead we often intensify them. Obviously the earlier we can catch ourselves in one of these chains of negative thinking the more easily we will be able to counteract their effects.

### Ways of thinking

What follows is a list of ways of thinking which can intensify feelings of anxiety, anger and depression.

1. **catastrophising** This is one of the most common ways of thinking about the world and there is evidence that this form of thinking is common amongst everybody, however it poses a special danger to people who are inclined to emotional difficulties. A typical form is to exaggerate the likely negative consequences of a situation or action. A fearful person may believe that unless they check all the window catches three times then their house will certainly be burgled. Another person might worry that one mistake at work will lead to the sack. With catastrophising we take a scenario that is quite unlikely to happen and treat it as if it was the most likely outcome. Sometimes this way of feeling leads to paralysis or procrastination. The solution is to consider a whole range of likely outcomes, write them down and try, as impartially as you can, to rate the chances of each one occurring. It is then a good idea to create a new thought which encapsulates a more realistic view of the likely outcome. It is also worth practising the use of such phrases as "It's not

the end of the world" and "Nobody died". The point of this is to acquire a sense of perspective.

2. **Black and white thinking**. This is very similar to catastrophising. People who are prone to this think in terms of polarised thinking. An example of this would be "Either I am the wittiest person at the party or I am stupid and boring". Another would be "Either I succeed brilliantly at my job or I am a total failure". We can apply this style of thinking to the world around us e.g. "Either London is totally safe or it is hideously dangerous". "Either my house is immaculate or it is a total mess". These styles of thinking can lead easily to depression, anxiety or to being very self punitive. These kinds of thoughts can be a great hindrance to people working on a drug, alcohol or eating difficulty. It is easy for someone who is trying to eat more sensibly to say to themselves "Now I've blown it!" if, for example, they eat an excessively large slice of cake. This may lead on to binge eating, the psychology being "Now that I've made a complete mess of my eating plan there is no reason why I shouldn't just stop trying altogether"

3. **mind reading** in mind reading we tend to make assumptions about what other people are thinking about us. These invariably turn out to be harsh judgements and negative thoughts. An office worker may conclude that her boss will be contemptuous of her every time she makes a mistake; in fact she may be relieved that her assistant is human after all. Or she may simply not regard it as the least bit important. When we mind read we are often ascribing to others the kinds of harsh judgements we make about ourselves or assuming that others will be as critical of us as we are of others. This brings me on to a whole way of thinking about the world.....
4. **judgementalism** when we think about ourselves we often reflect the view taken of us by parents and teachers when we were young. These ways of thinking may reflect a very harsh and unkind way of viewing the world. It is a good idea to practise thinking in modern, compassionate and humane ways. A good way of doing this is to ask ourselves what we would say to a friend who found him or herself in a situation similar to our own. We might realise that we would say to our friend something like this "Don't

worry about that...anybody can make a mistake, it wasn't very serious....in three weeks time everybody will have forgotten about it, it was very understandable that you made that mistake because...." When we are compassionate we have empathy and sympathy for ourselves when we feel unhappy. When we are compassionate we are more concerned with forgiving than with condemning. When we are compassionate we realise that most people's lives are pretty messy and that we are doing our best. When we are compassionate we are friendly towards ourselves, we do not attack ourselves but we speak to ourselves in warm, loving, gentle and kind ways. It is important to cultivate an inner voice which is on our own side and which is nice to ourselves.

5. **Personalising**. With personalising you tend to see things that happen to you in a way which relates to your supposed defects rather than in any other way. For example, if your friend walks straight past you on the street without looking at you, you may jump to the conclusion that he is upset with you because you failed to phone him. In fact, it could be for a whole host of reasons, perhaps your friend has

toothache or is late for a meeting, or is thinking deeply about something. Perhaps your friend had his attention caught by an advertising board on the other side of the road or is upset because his dog died or he had a row with his partner in the morning. With personalising you ignore all possibilities except those that lead back to you and to your failings. When you catch yourself thinking like this it would be very helpful to draw a pie chart and to include in it all the possible reasons for an action which has made you unhappy and you will almost certainly see that it is quite unlikely that your assumptions are correct. Like many of the other examples so far in this booklet this is also an example of.....

6. **pessimistic** thinking. You may be surprised to learn that optimism and pessimism do not have to be seen as unchangeable personality characteristics. It is possible to practise thinking more optimistically. Indeed contrary to the common belief that pessimism is only another word for realism, there is some evidence to suggest that people in general are excessively pessimistic. For example an experiment was done in which people were asked to predict five bad things that they thought were certain to happen

in the next five years. Five years later the same people were asked whether those events had occurred or not and it transpired that 80% of them hadn't. So the well know phrase "it may never happen" turns out to be true more often than not.

7. **overgeneralising**. In overgeneralising you draw excessive conclusions from a single event. For example a person is turned down for a date and concludes "Nobody could ever find me loveable". A single tube train is late and a passenger tells himself "You can't rely on the whole London transport system". You can see that this way of thinking enables people to wind themselves up to a considerable extent!
8. **discounting**. Here you ignore evidence that does not fit your belief about yourself or you find a way of minimising its importance. A person who thinks that he is stupid gains a first class honours degree and thinks to himself "Well it wasn't a very good first class and anyway the examiner must have been too lenient".
9. **emotional reasoning**. In emotional reasoning you argue backwards from your emotions instead of paying attention to the realities of a situation. For

example you feel very dissatisfied with your neighbour and so you believe that you must have good reason to be. In fact, the evidence may suggest that you are very lucky to have such a good neighbour and you are only feeling annoyed with him because you are in a bad mood.

10. **entitlement fallacies**. When we are children we are often taught that the world should or will be fair. If as adults we may hope that this will be so but it is unrealistic to expect that it will be so. We may feel entitled to be treated well by others regardless of how we behave ourselves. We may feel entitled to be rich and famous and we may feel entitled to be successful even if we make little effort in that direction. These are all examples of having unrealistic expectations. If we do this we will only make ourselves unhappy.

11. **Three Illogical beliefs**.

Professor Windy Dryden, probably Britain's best known academic writer on therapy, believes that there are three main irrational beliefs that underlie serious emotional problems. They are, in his own words:

- a) Because it would be highly preferable if I were outstandingly competent and/or loved by others, I absolutely should and must be. It is awful when I am not and I am therefore a worthless individual.
- b) Because it is highly desirable that others treat me considerately and fairly, they absolutely must and should do so and they are rotten people who deserve to be utterly condemned when they do not.
- c) Because it is preferable that I experience pleasure rather than pain, the world must absolutely arrange this, and life is horrible and I can't bear it, when the world does not.

With such beliefs, all of which are examples of entitlement fallacies, the solution is to replace them with more reasonable, measured, moderate and balanced beliefs.

With other kinds of irrational thinking, you may find the ABCD system useful. In this A stands for the ACTIVATING EVENT which has upset you. Let us suppose the A is that you hand a project to your boss one day late.

The B stands for the beliefs that you bring to bear on this event. For example, you may believe :  
I must never be late with any of my work  
If I am late, then I am not perfect and must be a total failure  
I will be fired for my incompetence.

The C stands for the emotional consequences of these beliefs. Here C may be that you feel unworthy, useless, and depressed.

The D stands for debating. Here you may reason that your boss frequently makes unreasonable demands. You may recall that no-one ever meets his/her unreasonable deadlines. You have done exceptionally well to be only a day late. You realise that it is wrong to think you are either perfect or a failure- this is "black-and-white thinking". Your boss is highly unlikely to fire you- you have been catastrophising.

Now, after this debating, you can create a new C. The new C is that you feel proud of yourself and relaxed.

This has not been an academic account of Cognitive therapy. I have drawn upon Cognitive therapy, Rational-Emotive therapy, and Positive Psychology, and I have mixed all three together in what seemed to me a logical order.