

BALANCED THINKING

July, 2021

Increased Balanced Thinking

There is strong theory and research indicating that overly negative thinking may cause or maintain emotional distress. Our thoughts, or “self-talk,” are one of the interrelated factors that can influence our feelings, behaviors, and health. One very successful and effective treatment focuses on increasing “balanced thinking” by changing thinking from being excessively negative to being more positive, realistic, or balanced.

Shifting our thinking from overly negative thoughts to more positive, realistic thoughts can be difficult to do. The information and exercises on the following pages are provided to help increase your understanding of the role of your thoughts in emotional distress, and to improve your ability to balance your thinking.

Accurate vs Distorted Beliefs

- ACCURATE BELIEFS AND SELF-TALK can enhance your ability to maintain a positive perspective and mood, and to minimize the negative physical and emotional consequence of a situation.
- However, sometimes thoughts can be **INACCURATE**, **UNREALISTIC**, or **DISTORTED**. When someone is emotionally distressed, they often focus on the negative side of things. They may just focus on one side of the issue and ignore other ways of viewing the situation. This can lead to worsening of their feelings or mood.

For example, imagine how you would feel if you were given a task to do and you had thoughts like:

- I’m never going to get this work done.
- I’m terrible at this kind of thing.
- I’m sure I’m going to just mess it up somehow.

Most people would feel *miserable* if they had these beliefs.

- We are suggesting that it might be helpful to look at all the angles - negative, positive, and neutral. This may lead to different conclusions and different emotions. We are not suggesting that you should look at the world with only “rose-colored glasses,” but dark tinted glasses are not helpful either. Instead, the goal is to wear clear glasses, which will help you see the world more accurately.
- If you have been monitoring your feelings, you may have noticed that there are patterns of situations that contribute to your feeling more distressed. Developing a list of more positive or realistic, balanced thoughts or perspectives to use in these times or situations can be helpful.

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Increasing Balanced Thinking: An Example

The following example may be helpful in illustrating the way that distorted, negative thinking may contribute to emotional distress, and how more balanced thinking may help decrease these feelings:

Peter noticed that he consistently felt more “down on himself” after someone was critical towards him. He realized that this was a pattern both at work (with his boss) and at home (with his wife). He discovered that when he believed others were upset or disappointed with him, he began to have overly negative thoughts about himself, which led to feeling more upset.

To help himself develop more balanced thinking, Peter spent some time writing down the negative thoughts he typically had in situations when others had been critical of him. Here is his list of some of his negative thoughts he found he habitually said after being criticized by his boss:

- I’m always getting criticized at work. I’m horrible at my job.
- I will never get promoted.
- I’m such a loser.

Next, Peter spent some time developing a list of more realistic, balanced thoughts specifically focused on how he felt when criticized at work. This allowed him to prepare ahead of time for these difficult situations. Here is his list of more balanced thoughts:

- I can’t always please everyone.
- I can use critical comments to improve my performance next time.
- No one is perfect.
- I did the best I could.
- I can’t control what my boss thinks; what matters most is what I think.

Peter wrote these balanced thoughts down on an index card and carried it with him. He pulled it out and read it to himself whenever he noticed himself falling into the negative thinking trap after being criticized by others. Eventually, these “new” balanced thoughts became more natural and replaced his prior negative thoughts. This strategy helped Peter develop more balanced thinking and improved his mood.

Changing our style of thinking can be difficult, because thought patterns tend to become habits over time. Thus, just like changing any habit, it will take effort and repetition to develop new habits of balanced thinking. The exercise on the following page can help you get started on this process.

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Balancing Your Own Thinking: An exercise

The following questions are designed to help you begin the process of balancing your own thinking to decrease emotional distress.

1. What situations are you feeling really upset about at this time in your life? What types of situations or experiences tend to worsen your mood?
2. What negative thoughts do you tell yourself about these situations or experiences?
3. What are some realistic or balanced thoughts about these situations or experiences? Develop as many realistic or balanced statements as possible and list them here:

If you find that you're having a difficult time developing more balanced thoughts, you might want to consider asking a trusted friend or family member to help you with the above exercise.

In addition, asking yourself the following questions may help you develop more balanced, realistic thinking:

- Is it really that bad?
- Am I viewing the future of this situation in an overly pessimistic way?
- Can I handle this? Can I cope with it more effectively?
- What positives might come from this situation?
- Will the situation always stay this bad? Will it pass or lessen at some point?
- How could it be worse? How is it in fact worse for others?
- What difficult situations have I dealt with before?
- Is it really that hopeless?

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4. From your responses on Question 3, select the balanced thoughts that seem most helpful and meaningful to you. Transfer these balanced thoughts onto the “cards” below. These can be cut out and carried with you for easy reference during time when you notice yourself falling into prior negative thinking patterns.

Negative Thought: _____

Balanced Thoughts: _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Additional Resources (Self-help workbooks)

“Feeling Good” by David Burns, M.D.

“Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life” by Stephen Hayes, Ph.D.

“Mind over Mood” by Dennis Greenberger, Ph.D., & Christine Pedesky, Ph.D.

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