

## Changing Unhelpful Thinking (2) – Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts

Our extreme and unhelpful thoughts are often inaccurate and untrue. Pretend you are a scientist approaching the issue in a completely logical way, or a judge in a court of law, weighing up the evidence without becoming emotionally involved.

Try completing a '5 areas' review (see leaflet 12 for how to do this) of a time you felt upset and see if you can identify an unhelpful or upsetting thought to put in the box below.

1. First, write down your example of an unhelpful or upsetting thought:

2. Next, rate how much you believe the upsetting thought by making a cross on the line below to show how much you believed the thought at the time.

Not at all believed Completely believed

0% ● ● 100%

Example: Paul's painting:

Paul has very high standards and is currently feeling depressed and anxious. He has decided to paint his bedroom as a way of increasing his activity levels. He has just completed painting the walls when he realises that a drop of paint has fallen onto the carpet. He immediately feels down and angry with himself and thinks "I always mess things up". He rates his belief in this as 75% at the time.

He carries out a '5 areas' review of the situation and recognises that the thought shows one of the unhelpful thinking styles and is linked to his feeling upset. He tries to stop, think and reflect on it, and say something truly compassionate to himself. In spite of this he feels upset, stops painting and goes to bed. Later on he reflects that this upsetting thought would be a good one to challenge.

Would the thought that you have chosen be a good one to challenge? If it is, start off by refusing to just accept the thought. You may be in the habit of accepting and believing such thoughts without question. Instead, try asking yourself the following questions:

1. What unhelpful thinking style am I using? (There is a separate leaflet on '*Recognising Unhelpful Thinking (1) – Unhelpful Thinking Styles*'. Ask your guide for a copy if you haven't already got one). Are you showing a bias against yourself, or jumping to conclusions or putting a negative slant on things? If the answer is yes, ask yourself the next question
2. What is the evidence? In Paul's example, he needs to ask himself 'Is it true that I always mess things up, or is that an exaggeration? Can I think of other times when I haven't messed things up? Is it really as bad as I am making out? What would I tell a friend who had just done the same thing? Having hopefully started to question the unhelpful thought, try asking yourself the next question
3. What alternative thought(s) can I come up with? This is often very difficult since you may be challenging not just one thought, but perhaps a way of thinking about yourself that has been going on for so long it has become automatic. Any new thought you come up with is unlikely to be as believable as the old thought to start with, so you need to practise using the alternative thought. Paul's alternative thought went something like 'I don't always make a mess. I have made a good job of the painting. One drop isn't the end of the world. It could have happened to anyone'. Paul also recognised that he is in the habit of putting himself down at every opportunity, so he decides to start noticing whenever it happens and make an effort to come up with an alternative thought. Remember, there is no limit to the number of alternative thoughts you can come up with.

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Contd.

Finally, when you have managed to find an acceptable alternative thought, write it down below.

Now, re-rate your belief in the original upsetting thought:

Not at all believed Completely believed



Now, rate your belief in the new alternative thought:

Not at all believed Completely believed



Paul's example:

Paul re-rates his thoughts. He believes the original upsetting thought now only 25%. Before, he had believed it 75%. At the same time he believes his new alternative thought about 90%. He has successfully been able to challenge the upsetting thought. Now he needs to test the helpfulness and accuracy of the new thought by acting on it as often as he can, believing it to be true, and see what happens. This may mean choosing to do the reverse of what the upsetting thought may be telling you.

**Making Unhelpful Predictions**

If you are troubled by unhelpful thoughts about things that haven't happened yet, you can still do this exercise to help you find alternative thoughts that you can then test out by seeing what actually happens and deciding which prediction came closest. It may also help if you ask yourself additional questions such as 'What is the worst that can happen?' 'What is the best that can happen?' Realistically, what is most likely to happen will almost always be somewhere between the best and the worst.

**Summary:**

The key steps of challenging and changing your unhelpful thoughts are:

- Stop think & reflect: don't get caught up in it
- Move on: don't be put off from what you were going to do.
- Keep active. Face your fears. Keep to your plan.
- Give yourself a truly compassionate response – e.g. what would someone who loved you wholly and totally say?

If you want to:

- Rate how much you believe the thought (0 – 100%)
- Ask yourself the 3 thought challenge questions:
  - What unhelpful thinking style am I using?
  - What is the evidence?
  - What alternative thought(s) can I come up with?
- Experiment: test it out. Come to a balanced conclusion. Act against the original extreme thought and act instead on your balanced alternative thought. Test your unhelpful predictions and see what happens.
- Re- rate how much you believe the original upsetting thought and the new alternative thought. The alternative thought is new so it probably won't be as believable as the old negative thought to begin with, so you need to practice using the alternative thought to help build up its credibility
- Remember this process takes time, and only by practice will you build confidence in using this approach.

Related leaflets include:

- > Completing your own 5 areas review
- > Recognising Unhelpful Thinking (1) and (2)
- > Changing unhelpful thinking (1) and (3)

