

Changing Unhelpful Thinking (3) – Guilt & Worry

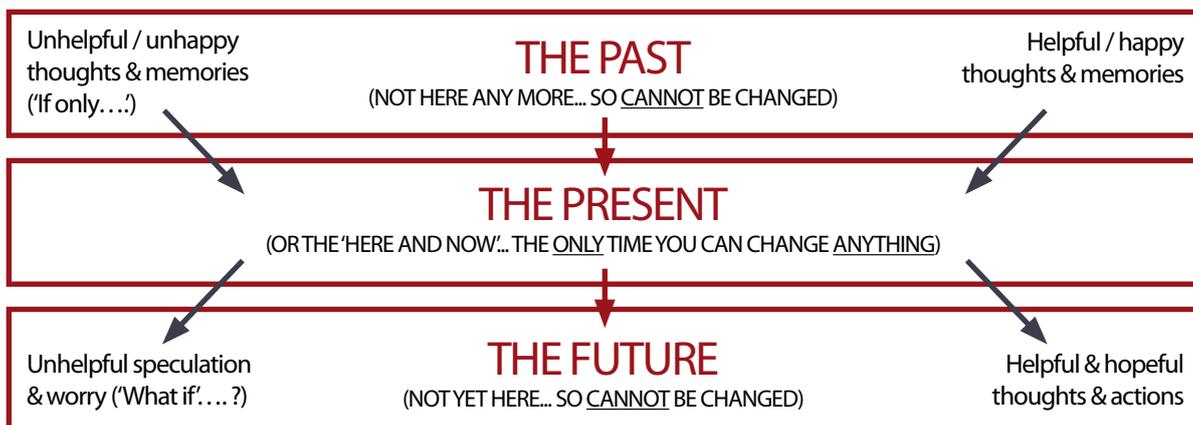


The simple fact is that none of us can physically go into the past or the future and change one single second or event. The only time we can change anything is right here and now, in the present moment. But many of us use a lot of time and energy in the present thinking unhelpfully about the past or the future. So, what can we do instead? The important thing to realise about our thoughts and behaviours is that we can actually make choices about them in the present.

Human beings have an amazing ability – we can bring the past and the future into the present just by the power of thought. We bring the past into the present in the form of memories and images and the future into the present in the form of speculation and imagination. However, just like every other mental activity, our thoughts about the past and future are not always helpful in the present – in fact they can make the present a tough place for us. Remembering distressing things from our past can leave us feeling distressed, angry or guilty in the present, even though the distressing things have actually stopped happening, perhaps a long time ago. Worrying about the future can leave us feeling unhappy and frightened in the present, even though our worries hardly ever happen exactly as we feared, and frequently our predictions are very wide of the mark.

Look at the diagram below. The top box relates to the past. On the left are the unhelpful choices – unhappy thoughts and memories that leave us feeling depressed, guilty or angry. These thoughts often start with ‘If only...’ for example ‘If only my father hadn’t criticised me all the time’ or ‘If only I hadn’t left my partner and children’. The bottom box relates to the future. On the left side are the unhelpful choices -worries about the future that leave us feeling anxious or depressed. These thoughts often start with ‘What if...?’ for example ‘What if I lose my job?’ or ‘What if nobody talks to me at the party tonight?’

On the right of each box are the more helpful choices. Most of us will have happy memories from the past too, that we can choose to remember in the present rather than dwell on our pain. Even if we cannot remember anything happy, we can choose to think and do things in



Related leaflets include:

- > Recognising Helpful and Unhelpful Behaviours
- > Changing Unhelpful Behaviours (1) and (2)

- > Using Guided Self Help – An Introduction
- > Recognising Unhelpful Thinking (1) and (2)
- > Changing Unhelpful Thinking (1) and (2)



Changing Unhelpful Thinking (3) – Guilt & Worry

Contd.

the present that leave us feeling happier instead of just going over the same old distressing memories. Often the best thing we can do with unhelpful memories is to learn what we can from them, then give ourselves permission to let them go, or just ignore them when we find ourselves thinking about them - not easy to do, as distressing memories are often very intrusive and persistent.

As for the future, ask yourself, how often do your worrying predictions come true? Are they really worth all the time and energy you give them, or the distress they leave you feeling? It may even be that dwelling on our worries make it more likely that they will happen – this is called a ‘self fulfilling prophecy’. None of us really knows what the future will bring, so instead of worrying about the future, why not prepare hopefully for it? We have no way of knowing whether our hopes or our fears will come true, so why not think about the future in a way that leaves us feeling happier in the present? Perhaps the ‘self fulfilling prophecy’ works both ways – if we think positively in the present, positive things are more likely to happen.

The way to find out whether your thoughts and behaviours are helpful or unhelpful is to look at your feelings — if you are feeling low or anxious then the chances are that your thoughts and behaviours are also low and anxious, on the other hand if you are feeling happy or calm then your thoughts and behaviours will usually reflect this.

To summarise, the most important fact to remember is that YOU CANNOT CHANGE THE PAST OR THE FUTURE.

So what can you do if you find yourself frequently feeling guilty, angry or upset about things that have happened in the past, or worrying excessively about things that haven't happened yet?

Here are 5 suggestions:

1. Accept responsibility for your own thoughts, feelings and behaviours and allow other people to do the same. Other people can only make you feel guilty or worried if you allow them to. Refusing to worry or feel guilty does not mean that you do not care — it just means that you can choose to do something more helpful instead.
2. Accept that nobody is perfect. We have all made mistakes or suffered because of our own or other people's mistakes and we are all likely to go on making mistakes in the future. Learn what you can from those mistakes, change what you can in the present and approach the future with as much self-belief and self-confidence as you can muster.
3. Allow yourself some ‘worry time’ or ‘guilt time’ each day and whenever a guilty or worrying thought comes into your head, choose to put it off until the time you have chosen.
4. Keep your worry or guilt in perspective. How much time in the present do you really want to spend feeling bad about things that you cannot change? How important will what you are feeling bad about be in a years time, or 10 years time?
5. Accept that the unhelpful thoughts and memories may keep coming back and that trying to get rid of them just makes them worse — instead, try just letting them be and then fill your mind and your life as much as possible with people, things and activities that give you pleasure and leave you feeling good about yourself. Care about yourself as much as you care about others — you are worth it!