

## Changing Unhelpful Thinking (1) – A Beginning

The following steps are a proven way of changing thoughts that are extreme and unhelpful. You can use as many or as few of the following steps as you need. Just stop when you feel you are able to move on from the thought.

1. Label the thought as “*just one of those unhelpful thoughts*”. All of us notice unhelpful thoughts from time to time. These sorts of thoughts can backfire and worsen how we feel. They are more often present at times when we are struggling.
2. Stop, think & reflect: Don't allow yourself to get caught up in it. Don't bother trying to challenge the thought, or argue yourself out of it. Like a celebrity such thoughts love attention. They're just not worth your attention. Allow them to just be. Take a mental step back from the thought as if observing it from a distance. Move your mind on to other more helpful things such as hopes for the future or recent achievements, or even better onto the task in hand.
3. Move on: act against it: don't be put off from what you were going to do. Unhelpful thinking worsens how you feel and unhelpfully alters what you do. This leads to a loss of pleasure and achievement and in the longer term will restrict your life and undermine your confidence. Instead, make an active choice to react against the thought and choose to act helpfully rather than unhelpfully.
4. Respond by giving yourself a truly compassionate response. If a friend were troubled by a thought or worry you would offer words of advice to soothe and encourage them. Imagine you have the best friend in the world. Someone who is totally on your side, totally loving and totally compassionate. What words of advice and encouragement would they say to you?



### The big bully

Extreme and unhelpful thoughts can enslave us. Once we start worrying needlessly or become very negative it is possible to get pushed about by our negative and fearful thoughts. Stopping, thinking and reflecting can help us avoid this pitfall.

Imagine a child who is bullied at school. We can all understand how scared they may become and how they may hand over whatever the bully demands because they are terrified of being hurt or humiliated. In fact, this is quite a good short-term way of solving the problem. They hand over their pocket money and the bully goes away. However giving in to the bully makes it more likely they will come back. In fact, the more you give the more they return.

What would happen if every time the bully returned the child did not hand over what they wanted? It is easy to imagine the initial anxiety the child would feel, but bullies usually make empty threats. They might start off being more persistent or threatening, but sooner or later they stop coming back if it is no longer worthwhile for them to do so. We can see the same pattern when we get caught up in going over thoughts again and again. Letting ourselves be pushed around by our thoughts actually doesn't help.



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Contd.



To summarise

You can stand up to the bully by:

- > Doing what you planned to do anyway. Keep to your plan. Stay active.
- > Facing your fears. Act against thoughts that tell you that things are too scary and you should avoid things. By creating a step-by-step approach you can overcome these fears. See the other '*Changing Unhelpful Thinking*' leaflets for more information on how to do this.
- > Experimenting: if a thought says don't do something - do it. If a thought says you won't enjoy going to that wedding, try going and see if you do.
- > Don't let your thoughts stop you doing the things you want to do.
- > Try not to live your life based on fear.
- > Try not to block how you feel with drink or with safety behaviours such as seeking reassurance.

Why reassurance seeking can be a problem

Reassurance seeking can be quite subtle. None of us likes to admit we sometimes seek reassurance — however it is a very human thing that we all do from time to time. This doesn't just mean seeking praise or approval from others. It also includes times when we feel anxious and look to others to reassure us that everything will be okay. If we do this from time to time this isn't a problem — we all do this. However sometimes we can become dependent on needing this sort of reassurance. It then becomes a problem — and actually ends up undermining how we feel and reducing our confidence. We end up feeling that we cannot do things without other people's help.

Many people find that the four steps described at the beginning of this leaflet are enough to help change or tolerate unhelpful thoughts, helping to break the 'vicious cycle' of unhelpful thoughts, feelings and behaviour. However, if you feel that you need something more, ask your guide for another leaflet. You can start with '*Recognising Unhelpful Thinking (1) and (2)*' if you need help in pinning down your unhelpful thoughts, then you can move on to the '*Changing Unhelpful Thinking (2) and (3)*' leaflets when you feel ready.

**REMEMBER — YOUR THOUGHTS ARE NOT FACTS, THEY ARE JUST YOUR OPINIONS THAT CAN BE CHANGED BY YOU.**