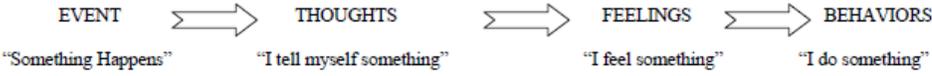
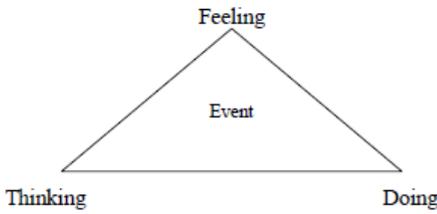
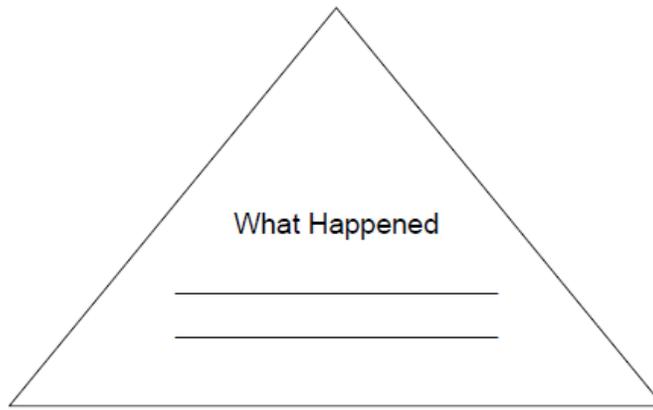


Cognitive Triangle Worksheet



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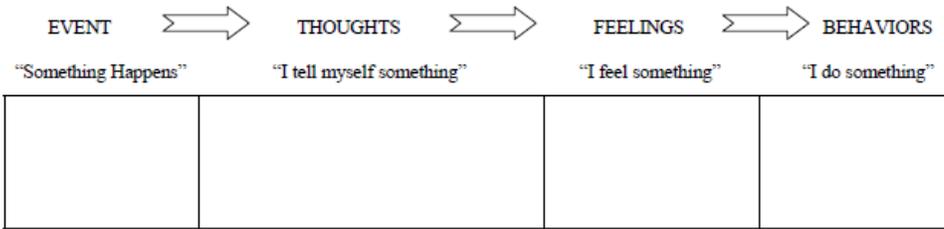
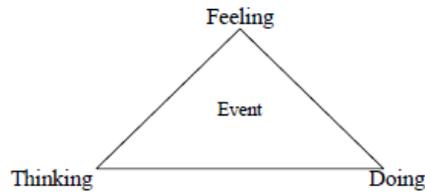
Feeling



Thinking

Doing

Cognitive Triangle: Challenging Your Thinking Mistakes



Are my thoughts accurate? _____

Are my thoughts helpful? _____

Am I falling into a Thinking Mistake trap*? (If so, which one) _____

What could I say to myself that would be more accurate, positive, or helpful? _____

How would I feel if I told myself this? _____

*Thinking Mistakes Worksheet (e.g., Herbert (2005), *Thinking Mistakes Form*, Drexel University, Philadelphia.

Week 7: Handout A

COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

15 Common Cognitive Distortions

By John M. Grohol, Psy.D.

What's a *cognitive distortion* and why do so many people have them? Cognitive distortions are simply ways that our mind convinces us of something that isn't really true. These inaccurate thoughts are usually used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions — telling ourselves things that sound rational and accurate, but really only serve to keep us feeling bad about ourselves.

For instance, a person might tell themselves, "I always fail when I try to do something new; I therefore fail at everything I try." This is an example of "black or white" (or *polarized*) thinking. The person is only seeing things in absolutes — that if they fail at one thing, they must fail at **all** things. If they added, "I must be a complete loser and failure" to their thinking, that would also be an example of *overgeneralization* — taking a failure at one specific task and generalizing it their very self and identity.

Cognitive distortions are at the core of what many cognitive-behavioral and other kinds of therapists try and help a person learn to change in psychotherapy. By learning to correctly identify this kind of "stinkin' thinkin'," a person can then answer the negative thinking back, and refute it. By refuting the negative thinking over and over again, it will slowly diminish overtime and be automatically replaced by more rational, balanced thinking.

Cognitive Distortions

Aaron Beck first proposed the theory behind cognitive distortions and David Burns was responsible for popularizing it with common names and examples for the distortions.

1. Filtering.

We take the negative details and magnify them while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail and dwell on it exclusively so that their vision of reality becomes darkened or distorted.

2. Polarized Thinking (or "Black and White" Thinking).

In polarized thinking, things are either "black-or-white." We have to be perfect or we're a failure — there is no middle ground. You place people or situations in "either/or" categories, with no shades of gray or allowing for the complexity of most

people and situations. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

3. Overgeneralization.

In this cognitive distortion, we come to a general conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens only once, we expect it to happen over and over again. A person may see a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat.

4. Jumping to Conclusions.

Without individuals saying so, we know what they are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, we are able to determine how people are feeling toward us.

For example, a person may conclude that someone is reacting negatively toward them but doesn't actually bother to find out if they are correct. Another example is a person may anticipate that things will turn out badly, and will feel convinced that their prediction is already an established fact.

5. Catastrophizing.

We expect disaster to strike, no matter what. This is also referred to as "magnifying or minimizing." We hear about a problem and use *what if* questions (e.g., "What if tragedy strikes?" "What if it happens to me?").

For example, a person might exaggerate the importance of insignificant events (such as their mistake, or someone else's achievement). Or they may inappropriately shrink the magnitude of significant events until they appear tiny (for example, a person's own desirable qualities or someone else's imperfections).

6. Personalization.

Personalization is a distortion where a person believes that everything others do or say is some kind of direct, personal reaction to the person. We also compare ourselves to others trying to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc.

A person engaging in personalization may also see themselves as the cause of some unhealthy external event that they were not responsible for. For example, "We were late to the dinner party and *caused* the hostess to overcook the meal. If I had only pushed my husband to leave on time, this wouldn't have happened."

7. Control Fallacies.

If we feel *externally controlled*, we see ourselves as helpless a victim of fate. For example, "I can't help it if the quality of the work is poor, my boss demanded I

work overtime on it." The fallacy of *internal control* has us assuming responsibility for the pain and happiness of everyone around us. For example, "Why aren't you happy? Is it because of something I did?"

8. Fallacy of Fairness.

We feel resentful because we think we know what is fair, but other people won't agree with us. As our parents tell us, "Life is always fair," and people who go through life applying a measuring ruler against every situation judging its "fairness" will often feel badly and negative because of it.

9. Blaming.

We hold other people responsible for our pain, or take the other track and blame ourselves for every problem. For example, "Stop making me feel bad about myself!" Nobody can "make" us feel any particular way — only we have control over our own emotions and emotional reactions.

10. Shoulds.

We have a list of ironclad rules about how others and we should behave. People who break the rules make us angry, and we feel guilty when we violate these rules. A person may often believe they are trying to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if they have to be punished before they can do anything.

For example, "I really should exercise. I shouldn't be so lazy." *Musts* and *oughts* are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When a person directs *should statements* toward others, they often feel anger, frustration and resentment.

11. Emotional Reasoning.

We believe that what we feel must be true automatically. If we feel stupid and boring, then we must be stupid and boring. You assume that your unhealthy emotions reflect the way things really are — "I feel it, therefore it must be true."

12. Fallacy of Change.

We expect that other people will change to suit us if we just pressure or cajole them enough. We need to change people because our hopes for happiness seem to depend entirely on them.

13. Global Labeling.

We generalize one or two qualities into a negative global judgment. These are extreme forms of generalizing, and are also referred to as "labeling" and "mislabeling." Instead of describing an error in context of a specific situation, a person will attach an unhealthy label to themselves.

For example, they may say, "I'm a loser" in a situation where they failed at a specific task. When someone else's behavior rubs a person the wrong way, they may attach an unhealthy label to him, such as "He's a real jerk." Mislabeled involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded. For example, instead of saying someone drops her children off at daycare every day, a person who is mislabeling might say that "she abandons her children to strangers."

14. Always Being Right.

We are continually on trial to prove that our opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and we will go to any length to demonstrate our rightness. For example, "I don't care how badly arguing with me makes you feel, I'm going to win this argument no matter what because I'm right." Being right often is more important than the feelings of others around a person who engages in this cognitive distortion, even loved ones.

15. Heaven's Reward Fallacy.

We expect our sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if someone is keeping score. We feel bitter when the reward doesn't come.

Week 7: Handout B
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, & ACTIONS

The Keys to Self Awareness and Personal Growth

Our thoughts, feelings and actions are the keys to understanding ourselves. When we understand ourselves we make better decisions, have healthier relationships, and can lead more effective and fulfilling lives. Understanding how our thoughts, feelings and actions interact with each other can help us overcome problems with depression, anxiety, addiction, relationships, trauma symptoms and criminal behaviors. When we understand ourselves, we empower ourselves.

Thoughts

Our brain is constantly thinking, whether we are aware of it or not. It can't not think! Thinking is what brains do. If we are unaware of our thinking, we are living an unconscious and unexamined life. We perceive that we have little control over the events in our lives or our response to these events.

The first step toward increasing self awareness is to begin to pay attention to your thinking. Using a journal to write down thoughts can be helpful. When journaling, simply allow your thoughts to enter your awareness without judging them or trying to change them. The goal here is to increase awareness of your thinking. You may notice as you write that you are having thoughts about your thoughts! That's ok. That's your brain doing what it does best. For example, I may notice myself thinking, "He's an idiot" or "I'm an idiot." Then I begin thinking, "I shouldn't think that." Rather than avoid writing the thought because you judge it as wrong, DO write the thought as well as your thoughts about the thoughts.

Once you have increased awareness of your thinking, you can begin to notice some patterns in your thinking and some common "thinking errors." You may notice your "self talk" - the way you talk to yourself about yourself. Self talk can be affirming or derogatory, such as "I'm ok" v.s. "I'm no good." You may notice patterns in your thinking, such as a pattern of blaming others for your problems or making excuses for yourself or others.

Once you have achieved some awareness of your thought processes, you can begin to learn how thoughts can be rational or irrational, responsible or irresponsible, uplifting or depressing, angering or soothing. With practice and over time, you will come to recognize how your thinking influences your feelings, behaviors and mood states. You will learn how your thinking can improve or worsen symptoms of depression and anxiety, how "stinking thinking" can lead to a relapse to substance use, how some patterns of thinking can lead to criminal behavior and lifestyles, how your thoughts can lead to ongoing trauma and victimization or recovery from

trauma and victimization, and how your thinking affects your self worth, success or failure, and day to day decisions.

Feelings

We all have feelings. It's part of being human, and it's perfectly normal. We experience feelings of pain, anger, sorrow, joy, love, grief, fear, happiness, frustration, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, contentment, peace, sympathy, emptiness, loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, guilt, despair, bliss, terror, etc. We often label these feelings as "good or bad" and go to great extremes to increase "good" feelings and get rid of "bad" feelings; sometimes to our own demise. Substance abuse and dependence is often the outcome of our efforts to experience pleasure and avoid pain.

When we are able to accept our feelings and know that it's normal to have them, we are better able to cope with them effectively. For example, when I lose someone close to me and I know it's ok to feel sad, I am better able to cope with my grief. If I believe that it's a sign of weakness to show sadness or to cry, I will attempt to hide my feelings and will have difficulty coping with my sad feelings. Many people are socialized to express only happiness and anger. No matter how they are feeling, they will only show happiness or anger to others and will deny having feelings of sadness, guilt, pain or fear.

Coping with feelings involves being able to identify and name the feelings I am experiencing, the ability to accept that I am experiencing them, and knowing effective ways to express my feelings. It is important to note that other people and events do not "make me feel" a certain way. For example, rainy weather doesn't make me depressed and my friend doesn't make me angry. Those depressed and angry feelings are mine and I am in charge of them.

I may choose to feel depressed when it rains or angry when my friend is late, but the weather and my friend are not the causes of my sadness or anger. It's actually the thoughts I am having about the weather and my friend's behavior that determine how intensely sad or angry I feel. For example, if I tell myself that my friend shouldn't be late, that her lateness is a sign of disrespect, I can't stand when people disrespect me, and now I hate her for disrespecting me; I will probably feel intense feelings of anger and pain. If, on the other hand, I tell myself that she is probably late because she had a good reason and will be here soon enough, I may still be bothered or annoyed by her behavior and communicate my displeasure with having to wait, but the intensity of my feelings will be much more neutral and manageable.

Actions

My actions or behaviors are the things I do. They are separate from my being or personhood, and result from my thoughts and feelings. I may do a stupid thing without being a stupid person. I can make mistakes without being a failure. I can do something wrong or bad without being a bad person.

It is important to separate a person's actions from their personhood or personality. When I define myself by some past choice I made, I am limiting my ability to change. If I am a bad person, then I can only do bad things. That is an example of permanent thinking, and how permanent thinking effects my behavior and my feelings about myself. If I am a person who made a bad choice, I can make a better choice next time and will feel more hopeful about the future.

When my thinking is rational and responsible, my feelings are more stable and my actions are more effective. I am more likely to get what I want and need, and less likely to get what I don't want and need. It takes some time and effort to learn to recognize "faulty thinking" and how to replace irrational and irresponsible thinking patterns, but the rewards outweigh the effort by far.

Next Steps

With a basic understanding of thoughts, feelings and actions, and how they interact with each other; you are now equipped to focus on the particular patterns of thinking that are driving your feelings and actions. There are specific patterns of thinking that are known to contribute to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, delinquency and criminality. There are thinking patterns that contribute to domestic violence, anger problems, and trauma as well.

--Grohol