

‘Automatic Thoughts’

Write all the hurtful criticisms that are immediately coming to mind. Suppose, for example, you suddenly realize you're late for an important meeting. Your heart sinks and you're gripped with panic. Now ask yourself, "What thoughts are going through my mind right now? What am I saying to myself? Why is this upsetting me?" Then write these thoughts down in the left-hand column. You might have been thinking, "I never do anything right," and "I'm always late." Write these thoughts down in the left-hand column and number them (see Figure 4–1). You might also have thought, "Everyone will look down at me. This shows what a jerk I am." Just as fast as these thoughts cross your mind, jot them down. Why? Because they are the very cause of your emotional upset. They rip away at you like knives tearing in to your flesh. I'm sure you know what I mean because you've felt it.

‘Distortions’

Use the list of ten cognitive distortions to identify the thinking errors in each of your negative automatic thoughts. For instance, "I never do anything right" is an example of overgeneralization. Write this down in the middle column. Continue to pinpoint the distortions in your other automatic thoughts.

‘Rational Responses’

You are now ready for the crucial step in mood transformation— substituting a more rational, less upsetting thought in the right-hand column. You do not try to cheer yourself up by rationalizing or saying things you do not believe are objectively valid. Instead, try to recognize the truth. If what you write down in the Rational Response column is not convincing and realistic, it won't help you one bit. Make sure you believe in your rebuttal to self-criticism. This rational response can take into account what was illogical and erroneous about your self-critical automatic thought. For example, in answer to "I never do anything right," you could write, "Forget that! I do some things right and some wrong, just like everyone else. I fouled up on my appointment, but let's not blow this up out of proportion."

Suppose you cannot think of a rational response to a particular negative thought. Then just forget about it for a few days and come back to it later. You will usually be able to see the other side of the coin. As you work at the triple-column technique for fifteen minutes every day over a period of a month or two, you will find it gets easier and easier. Don't be afraid to ask other people how they would answer an upsetting thought if you can't figure out the appropriate rational response on your own.

One note of caution: Do not use words describing your emotional reactions in the Automatic Thought column. Just write the thoughts that created the emotion. For example, suppose you notice your car has a flat tire. Don't write "I feel crappy" because you can't disprove that with a rational response. The fact is, you do feel crappy. Instead, write down the thoughts that automatically flashed through your mind the moment you saw the tire; for example, "I'm so stupid— I should have gotten a new tire this last month," or "Oh, hell! This is just my rotten luck!" Then you can substitute rational responses such as "It might have been better

to get a new tire, but I'm not stupid and no one can predict the future with certainty." This process won't put air in the tire, but at least you won't have to change it with a deflated ego.

<i>Automatic Thoughts</i> (SELF-CRITICISM)	<i>Cognitive Distortion</i>	<i>Rational Response</i> (SELF-DEFENSE)
1. Everyone knows how disorganized and selfish I am.	Jumping to conclusions (mind reading); overgeneralization	1. I'm disorganized at times and I'm organized at times. Everybody doesn't think the same way about me.
2. I'm completely self-centered and thoughtless. I'm just no good.	All-or-nothing thinking	2. I'm thoughtless at times, and at times I can be quite thoughtful. I probably do act overly self-centered at times. I can work on this. I may be imperfect but I'm not "no good!"
3. My roommate probably hates me. I have no real friends.	Jumping to conclusions (mind reading); all-or-nothing thinking	3. My friendships are just as real as anyone's. At times I take criticism as rejection of <i>me</i> , Gail, the person. But others are usually not rejecting <i>me</i> . They're just expressing dislike for what I <i>did</i> (or said)—and they still accept me afterward.

<i>Situation</i> Briefly describe the actual event leading to the unpleasant emotion.	<i>Emotion(s)</i> 1. Specify sad/ anxious/ angry, etc. 2. Rate degree of emotion, 1–100%.	<i>Automatic Thought(s)</i> Write the automatic thought(s) that accompany the emotion(s).	<i>Cognitive Distortion(s)</i> Identify the distortion(s) present in each automatic thought.	<i>Rational Response(s)</i> Write rational response(s) to the automatic thought(s).	<i>Outcome</i> Specify and rate subsequent emotions, 0–100%.
Potential customer hangs up on me when I call to describe our new insurance program. He said, "Get out of my god-dam hair!"	Angry, 99% Sad, 50%	1. I'll never sell a policy. 2. I'd like to strangle the bastard. 3. I must have said the wrong thing.	1. Overgeneralization 2. Magnification; labeling 3. Jumping to conclusions; personalization	1. I've sold a lot of policies. 2. He acted like a pain in the butt. We all do at times. Why let this get to me? 3. I actually didn't do anything different from the way I usually approach a new customer. So why sweat it?	Angry, 50% Sad, 10%

Writing down your negative thoughts and rational responses may strike you as simplistic, ineffective, or even gimmicky. You might even share the feelings of some patients who initially refused to do this, saying, "What's the point? It won't work— it couldn't work because I really am hopeless and worthless." This attitude can only serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you are unwilling to pick up the tool and use it, you won't be able to do the job. Start by writing down your automatic thoughts and rational responses for fifteen minutes every day for two weeks and see the effect this has on your mood, as measured by the Burns Depression Checklist. You may be surprised to note the beginning of a period of personal growth and a healthy change in your self-image.

This was the experience of Gail, a young secretary whose sense of self-esteem was so low that she felt in constant danger of being criticized by friends. She was so sensitive to her roommate's request to help clean up their apartment after a party that she felt rejected and worthless. She was initially so pessimistic about her chances for feeling better that I could barely persuade her to give the triple-column technique a try. When she reluctantly decided to try it, she was surprised to see how her self-esteem and mood began to undergo a rapid transformation. She reported that writing down the many negative thoughts that flowed through her mind during the day helped her gain objectivity. She stopped taking these thoughts so seriously. As a result of Gail's daily written exercises, she began to feel better, and her interpersonal relationships improved by a quantum leap.

An excerpt from her written homework is the first chart above. Gail's experience is not unusual. The simple exercise of answering your negative thoughts with rational responses on a daily basis is at the heart of the cognitive method. It is one of the most important approaches to changing your thinking. It is crucial to write down your automatic thoughts and rational responses; do not try to do the exercise in your head. Writing them down forces you to develop much more objectivity than you could ever achieve by letting responses swirl through your mind. It also helps you locate the mental errors that depress you. The triple-column technique can be applied to a great range of emotional difficulties in which distorted thinking plays a central role. You can take the major sting out of problems you would ordinarily assume are entirely "realistic," such as bankruptcy, divorce, or severe mental illness.