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COGNITIVE THERAPY OVERVIEW

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy focuses on changing your thoughts. You may wonder how one goes about changing thoughts. Although there is no right way to change thoughts, below is a procedure that explains specific skills to develop and practice throughout the therapeutic process.

Specific Skills Related to Changing Unhealthy Thought Patterns

Here is a model for changing thought patterns by developing three specific skills:

1. **Catch the thoughts** - become more aware of thoughts.
2. **Check the thoughts** - question the accuracy of your assumptions and interpretations.
3. **Challenge the thoughts** - actively challenge thoughts that are unhealthy for you.

Stage 1: Catching the Thoughts

When an event happens (or is about to happen), we all have thoughts about the event without even trying. In cognitive therapy, these are referred to as "automatic thoughts." When we are feeling emotions such as fear or sadness the automatic thoughts can become biased towards more negative outcomes or evaluations (e.g., I am a failure, circumstances will never change). One of the first steps of changing your response to events or circumstances is to become aware of the associated thoughts. To get better at catching these thoughts, you can keep a thought record. Typically, a thought record includes columns for events, your automatic thoughts, and your feelings. It is especially important to record events and thoughts related to emotional responses that you are trying to understand or change.

Stage 2: Checking the Thoughts

Once you begin to recognize the thoughts associated with the event and your feelings, the next step is to check how accurate and realistic these thoughts really are. We don't routinely do this step on our own because the thoughts occur so quickly and because we just assume our thoughts are true. To get better at checking your thoughts, you can practice examining the realistic and unrealistic aspects of the thoughts. It is also possible that some thoughts seem quite realistic in certain situations or at certain times, but less realistic at other times. Examining how your thoughts change across different situations can also help to develop the ability to check the accuracy of your thoughts.

Step 3: Challenging the Thoughts

During this step, you challenge automatic thoughts and develop healthier ways to respond to the situation. Some specific techniques that you can use include weighing the evidence that supports or refutes the thought, considering what you may tell a friend in a similar situation, and learning to accept the possibility of unpleasant or unwanted experiences without becoming catastrophic. Evaluate and compare your thoughts to the cognitive distortion sheet. Are your thoughts reflections of one or more distortions? As you become better at challenging your thoughts, you may also find that you become better at developing alternative and more realistic interpretations.



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COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

Common thought errors that many people make:

1. **All-or-nothing thinking:** You see things in black and white categories, as in good or bad, perfect or a failure. You assign events to either end of the spectrum rather than the continuum that connects them.
2. **Overgeneralization:** You make sweeping negative conclusions that go beyond the scope of the current situation. You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. Ex. "If I fail this test my life will be over"
3. **Mental filter:** You pay undue attention to one negative detail instead of seeing the whole picture. You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives. You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened. Ex. Like the drop of ink that discolors the entire beaker of water.
4. **Disqualifying the positive:** You unreasonably tell yourself that the positive experiences, your accomplishments, or positive attributes don't count. You maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experience.
5. **Jumping to conclusions:** You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts or evidence that support your conclusion.
6. **Mind reading:** You believe you know what others are thinking and jump to conclusions.
7. **The Fortune Teller Error:** You predict the future negatively without considering other, more likely possibilities. You anticipate that things will turn out badly and feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact without any proof or evidence.
8. **Magnification (catastrophizing) or minimization:** You blow things out of proportion or you shrink their importance.
9. **Emotional reasoning:** You think something must be true because you feel it strongly. You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."
10. **Labeling and mislabeling:** This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a bad person." Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.
11. **"Should" statements:** You have a precise, fixed idea of how you and/or others "should" behave. You criticize yourself with "shoulds," "shouldn'ts," "musts," "ought to's," and "have to's." The emotional consequence about yourself is often met with guilt. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.
12. **Personalization:** You believe others are behaving negatively because of you without considering other explanations of their behavior. You blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for. You see yourself as the cause or blame of some negative external event.



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THOUGHT RECORD

Event	Automatic thoughts	Feelings	Healthier response
Accurate and realistic? Yes No			

Event	Automatic thoughts	Feelings	Healthier response
Accurate and realistic? Yes No			

Event	Automatic thoughts	Feelings	Healthier response
Accurate and realistic? Yes No			

Event	Automatic thoughts	Feelings	Healthier response
Accurate and realistic? Yes No			