**HOW TO CHALLENGE UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

People often experience unpleasant feelings and emotions: depression, anxiety, apprehension, frustration, and anger, for example. As many studies show, these emotions can often be ascribed to unhelpful thoughts—thoughts like “Everyone is happier than me”, “People do not respect me enough”, “Nothing works out for me”, or “Because of this mistake, the event is ruined”.

You might assume that you do not experience these thoughts. But, almost everyone experiences these thoughts to some extent—although you might not be entirely aware of these thoughts. This document will help you recognize these thoughts as well as diminish the impact of these thoughts on your emotions, ultimately to improve your mood.

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| **Identifying thoughts** |

To identify relevant thoughts, consider a recent time in which you experienced strong unpleasant emotions, such as anxiety or panic. Now attempt to identify some of the thoughts you were experiencing at the time. To help you with this task, decide whether you were experiencing any of the thoughts in the following table.

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| Common unhelpful thoughts | Your unhelpful thoughts |
| **Thoughts about failure** |  |
| If I fail this task, something terrible will happen |  |
| Because of this mistake, the event is ruined |  |
| This problem indicates my life is deteriorating |  |
| **Thoughts about success** |  |
| Anyone could have achieved this goal |  |
| They praised me only because they did not want to hurt my feelings |  |
| **Thoughts about social settings** |  |
| These people tried to avoid me |  |
| Their behaviour indicates they do not like me |  |
| I am never going to meet someone |  |
| If they disagree with me on this argument, they are stupid |  |

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| **Questions to ask about your thoughts** |

To challenge unhelpful thoughts, such as “People do not respect me enough”, you could subject these thoughts to questions. Here are some questions to consider

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| Question | Example | Your answers |
| What is the objective evidence that supports my thought? | * My supervisor dismissed my suggestion * My parents criticized me |  |
| What are other explanations of this evidence? | * Perhaps I am unaware of problems with my suggestion * Perhaps my parents were feeling anxious |  |
| What is the objective evidence against thought? | * People do listen to me ideas |  |
| Did I reach a conclusion without all the evidence? | * Perhaps I like to reach decisions prematurely because I do not like uncertainty * Perhaps I could have asked my supervisor why he dismissed my suggestion |  |
| Did I derive my thought more from unpleasant feelings than from evidence? | * Perhaps I reached this thought because I was panicking |  |
| Is my thought very likely, somewhat likely, unlikely, or a worst-case scenario? | * Very unlikely |  |
| What would a friend say about this thought | * I think my closest friend would suggest that I focus excessively on times in which people disagreed rather than on times in which they agreed |  |
| Did I learn this thought or assumption from someone else? If so, are they necessarily right? | * No |  |
| To what extent is this thought likely to matter a year from now—or five years from now | * Whether my supervisors respect me in the future is irrelevant * I think my parents are likely to respect my opinions more in the future |  |
| How could I shift this thought to a more specific, nuanced concern | * Maybe, when people seem rushed or distressed, they might not listen to me carefully   See the section on cognitive distortions |  |

After you contemplate your thoughts, several benefits are likely. In particular

* your future thoughts are more likely to be more nuanced and thus not as emotional
* you feel more detached from these thoughts—so their intensity diminishes

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| **Cognitive distortions** |

Many unhelpful thoughts can be divided into specific errors, called cognitive distortions or thinking biases. If you learn about these errors, you can uncover more helpful alternatives to your thoughts more effectively. The following table defines these cognitive distortions, presents an example, and presents a better alternative.

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| Cognitive distortion | Examples | Better alternatives |
| Catastrophizing: Magnifies the problems that could arise | If I do not complete this task well, I will be dismissed | If I do not complete this task well, I am not sure how people will react |
| What-if statements: Worrying about unlikely scenarios | What if I panic during the party | The party is likely to be OK. But, if not, I will leave |
| Overgeneralizing: Assumes one event will generalize to all other events | The cake did not arrive, so the party is ruined | The cake did not arrive, but other facets of the party were positive |
| Dichotomous thinking: Perceives people or events as either entirely good or bad, while disregarding grey areas | If he disagrees with me on this argument, such as capital punishment or abortion, he is stupid | If he disagrees with me on this argument, I may feel frustrated, but I also realize that most issues are more complex than perhaps they initially appear |
| Personalizing: Blames themselves for events they cannot control | They cancelled the party because they did not want me to attend | They cancelled the party; I am not certain why and the reasons may be complex |
| Blaming others: Ascribing problems to uncontrollable events | My parents caused all the problems | Some of my problems cannot be ascribed to my parents, but I now feel I can begin to forge my own pathway now |
| Labelling: Assigns labels to people, incorrectly implying they never change | He is an immoral person | He has engaged in behaviours that I believe are wrong, but he might sometimes be more compassionate |
| Discounting the positive: Dismissing praise and compliments | Anyone could have achieved this goal | Some other people may have achieved this goal, but I feel proud of my endeavours nonetheless |
| Mind reading: Generates assumptions about what people are thinking | They think I am naïve | Mind reading: Generating assumptions about what people are thinking |
| Fortune telling: Forms pessimistic predictions | I will never find a better job | At the moment, I feel that my career prospects are limited, but I realize these feelings and the circumstances could change soon |
| Should statements: Pursues unnecessary or unachievable obligations | I should succeed in every subject at school | Nobody can succeed all the time—because their life would then be unbalanced; if I do not succeed all the time, I can pursue other avenues to compensate later |

For each of your thoughts, specify which cognitive distortions or distortions you might have demonstrated. Use this insight to generate more helpful alternatives to your thoughts.