

PATTERNS OF THINKING AND IDENTIFYING AND CHALLENGING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

Humans are thinking animals and the power of human thought can transform our lives. The way in which we think can be both a strength and keep us stuck, as our thoughts can lift us up, or send us into a downward spiral into low mood.

So, one of the things that can influence how much your pain affects you is the way in which you think and feel about the pain. Putting it simply, if you have very scary beliefs about what is happening when you experience pain, you will probably feel more distressed than if you didn't think like that. This in turn can alter your pain experience.

Some thoughts can become more of a habit than a true picture of what is happening to you and the patterns of thinking we get into depend upon lots of different factors. If you get into a pattern of thinking scary thoughts about your pain you could find yourself getting so negative about your situation that you find it hard to believe there are any things you can do to improve the situation. You may think that you have no control over your thoughts and feelings – they are just the way they are. However, if you think about it, you will probably agree that you have changed the way you have thought about lots of things during your life, maybe as a result of a conversation, something you have read, or just as a result of your own experiences.

We all have a running commentary of 'thoughts' going through our heads most of the time, most of which we are not aware of unless we deliberately tune in. As you have seen from the cognitive behavioural model, our thoughts are also tied in to how we feel. For example, you think somebody you know may be ill and you feel worried, you think somebody has insulted you and you feel angry, or you think you have failed and you feel sad.

The problem with negative thinking

It is very common for people to have negative thoughts about their pain. However, once we begin to think negatively, this can develop into a pattern which gives rise to more negative thoughts and a vicious cycle develops. People can also 'churn' over a past situation, or worry about future events. At this point it can be very difficult to stop these thoughts and a negative emotional state (such as anxiety or depression) can get worse. At this point your pain is in control of you.

Pain Management aims to help you break this vicious cycle by amongst other things enabling you to manage unhelpful patterns of thinking better. This is done by helping you to develop skills in being able to work with your thoughts differently so that they do not have such a big influence on how you feel and what you do in response to your pain.

How do we do this?

By changing the way we think we can alter the way we feel emotionally and alter what we do in response to our pain.

What this is not saying is 'just think positively and everything will be all right'. This is far too simple a way of looking at things and if it worked then you probably would have been able to do it by now. However, by following the steps outlined, it is possible to break some **unhelpful** patterns of thinking and replace them with more **realistic** and **helpful** patterns.

We can get into some unhelpful patterns of thinking, which are an inaccurate picture of our problems because they do not take a balanced view and jump to conclusions before weighing up the evidence. Unhelpful patterns of thinking may either be too negative or too positive.

If they are too negative, you will probably feel more depressed or upset than you need to be. On the other hand, if they are too positive, everything might seem rosy but you will be heading for a fall – once again making everything just that much harder in the end.

More helpful thinking is more likely to help you sort out your problems and to find ways of dealing with them as effectively as possible. This doesn't mean that you can just think your problems away, rather it means that if you can think about your problems in an accurate way, weighing up all the evidence correctly, you are more likely to come up with helpful ways of dealing with them.

We all think in unrealistic ways at times – we're only human. If, however, you find yourself often feeling irritable, anxious or depressed then it is worth looking at the ways you are thinking when you start feeling like that. It could be that your thoughts have become part of the problem.

To help you think about the patterns of thinking you might be in we have described some of the most common thinking errors below:-

Patterns of Thinking

- **Catastrophic thinking** – This means reacting to a problem by imagining the worst possible outcome and then reacting as though it will come true. For example, you might say to yourself "Its hurting again, what if it never gets better etc". *This type of thinking is often characterised by "What if statements"*
- **Black and white thinking** –This type of thinking assumes that everything must always go perfectly, or it is no good. There is no middle ground, just black and white. In terms of pain management, people can easily fall into this trap by expecting total and rapid recovery instead of a slow process of improvement in quality of life.
- **Over-generalisation** – This pattern of thinking occurs when you treat one failure or setback as evidence for how things will always be. For instance, if you stop ironing/gardening etc because of the pain, you

may find yourself saying “ I can’t do anything” this type of thinking is characterised by words such as ‘never’, ‘always’, ‘every’, ‘nobody’ ‘all.

- **Mind reading** – This pattern of thinking occurs when we make assumptions about what other people might be thinking. Very often we take evidence for our assumptions from what people do rather than what they actually say. When we do this we usually misinterpret what other people are thinking and end up feeling negative and upset.
- **Shoulds/oughts/musts** – These words appear regularly in negative thinking about chronic pain. ‘Shoulds’ are usually a put down to yourself, implying that you were stupid or weak to have done something, or they are applied to others in the form of expectations “My family should understand what I am going through”.

All of the above produce **unhelpful** thoughts, which generally make it harder for you to cope with your pain.

How can we work on these?

STEP 1 Learn to identify your thoughts

- Take a few days to jot down all the thoughts that occur to you concerning your pain in a diary. Note when and where they occur using the ‘identifying and challenging thoughts’ record sheet. Write down *exactly* what you were thinking and be clear about the difference between thoughts and feelings.
- Then try and identify your own types of negative thoughts. You might notice some of the patterns of thinking we described earlier.
- **What do I do next!**

Now you have identified your patterns of negative thinking, it is time to practice challenging them.

STEP 2 Learn to challenge your thoughts

Some very useful questions to help you do this are:

- What evidence do I have for this thought?
- How would someone else view this situation?
- Am I setting unrealistic standards for myself, or others?
- Am I falling into an unhelpful negative thinking pattern?
- Am I confusing a thought with a fact?
- Is this thought helping me move forward or keeping me stuck?

STEP 3 Looking for other points of view

There is always more than one way of looking at everything!

It is very important that at the same time as challenging thoughts, you also try to replace those unhelpful thoughts with more realistic and helpful ones.

For example:

Instead of “**there is no point in trying I can’t do it**”, would it be more helpful to think “***it won’t be easy, but I’ll see what I can do***”. Or Instead of “**It just never seems to end, it’s hopeless**”, would it be more helpful to think “**I’ve got tough times like this before, I should be able to do it again**”.

Remember! – None of this stuff is easy. It will take time and regular practice using the diary sheets to help you develop the skills to challenge your thinking. There are no right or wrong ways of looking at things. You are just trying to create choices for yourself which might help you approach the management of your pain in more helpful ways.