

6 Steps in Cognitive Restructuring¹

STEP ONE – Identify the upsetting situation. Describe the event or problem that’s upsetting you. Who (or what) are you feeling unhappy about?

STEP TWO – Record your negative feelings. How do you feel about the upsetting situation? Identify the feeling word precisely. Use words like sad, irritated, annoyed, angry, enraged, anxious, guilty, ashamed, humiliated, regretful, bewildered, confused, flustered, swamped, frustrated, hopeless, despairing, scared, frightened, horrified, intimidated, vulnerable, uneasy, worried, unsure (or see attached feeling list). Rate each negative feeling for intensity on a scale from F-1 (for the least) to F-10 (for the most).

STEP THREE – Record your automatic thoughts. Tune in to the negative thoughts that are associated with these feelings. Pay attention to what are you saying to yourself about the problem. Write these thoughts in the third column and record how much you believe each one between B-0 (not at all) and B-10 (completely).

STEP FOUR - Analyze these thoughts using one of the “Checklist of Cognitive Distortions” (page 5). Record your observations from this analysis in the fourth column. The analysis should point out how your automatic thoughts are unfair, unrealistic or irrational. Following the analysis, rate your belief in the automatic thoughts again using a different colour ink. If they are less believable, proceed to step five. If not, continue the analysis using another method.

STEP FIVE – Construct realistic and balanced thoughts using one of the “10 Ways to Untwist Your Thinking (page 6). Construct more realistic, objective and balanced thoughts in the fifth column. You may wish to construct a 2-part response beginning with an honest acknowledgement of a realistic negative aspect of the situation, followed by the word, “BUT” and then a realistic positive consideration of the situation. The formula looks like this: Realistic Thinking = Negative (-) side, BUT Positive (+) side.

STEP SIX - Evaluate this restructuring process. Rate the degree to which you believe the reconstructed thoughts in column five (B-0 to B-10). Is it higher than your belief in the distorted automatic thoughts? Rate again the intensity of the feelings in column 2 (F-1 to F-10). Are they less intense than originally? If you are still not satisfied, return to step four.

¹Adapted from: Burns, D. D. (1989). The Feeling Good Handbook. Penguin: New York.

THE FIVE-COLUMN TECHNIQUE

Situation	Feelings	Automatic Thoughts	Cognitive Analysis	Realistic / Balanced Responses
Describe the event or problem that's upsetting you. Who (or what) are you feeling unhappy about?	How do you feel about the upsetting situation? Rate each negative feeling for intensity on a scale from F-1 (for the least) to F-10 (for the most)	Write down the thoughts that automatically occur to you as you think about the situation. Rate how much you believe each one between B-0 (not at all) and B-10 (completely).	Analyze these thoughts using one of the "10 ways to untwist your thinking."	Substitute more realistic thoughts. You may wish to construct a 2-part response beginning with the negative, followed by the word, "BUT" and the positive. Estimate your belief in each one (B-0 to B-10).

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CHECKLIST OF COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

1. All-or-nothing thinking: You look at things in absolute, black-and-white categories.
2. Overgeneralization: You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. Mental filter: You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives.
4. Discounting the positives: You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities “don’t count.”
5. Jumping to conclusions: (A) Mind reading – you assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there’s no definite evidence for this; (B) Fortune-telling – You arbitrarily predict that things will turn out badly.
6. Magnification or minimization: You blow things way up out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately.
7. Emotional reasoning: You reason from how you feel: “I *feel* like an idiot, so I really must be one.” Or “I don’t *feel* like doing this, so I’ll put it off.”
8. “Should statements”: You criticize yourself or other people with “shoulds” or “shouldn’ts.” “Musts,” “oughts,” and “have tos” are similar offenders.
9. Labelling: You identify with your shortcomings. Instead of saying “I made a mistake,” you tell yourself, “I’m a jerk,” or “a fool,” or “a loser.”
10. Personalization and blame: You blame yourself for something you weren’t entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behaviour might contribute to a problem.

10 WAYS TO UNTWIST YOUR THINKING

From "The Feeling Good Handbook" by David D. Burns, M.D. © 1989

1. **Identify The Distortion:** Write down your negative thoughts so you can see which of the ten cognitive distortions you're involved in. This will make it easier to think about the problem in a more positive and realistic way.
2. **Examine The Evidence:** Instead of assuming that your negative thought is true, examine the actual evidence for it. For example, if you feel that you never do anything right, you could list several things you have done successfully.
3. **The Double-Standard Method:** Instead of putting yourself down in a harsh, condemning way, talk to yourself in the same compassionate way you would talk to a friend with a similar problem.
4. **The Experimental Technique:** Do an experiment to test the validity of your negative thought. For example, if during an episode of panic, you become terrified that you're about to die of a heart attack, you could jog or run up and down several flights of stairs. This will prove that your heart is healthy and strong.
5. **Thinking In Shades Of Grey:** Although this method may sound drab, the effects can be illuminating. Instead of thinking about your problems in all-or-nothing extremes, evaluate things on a scale of 0 to 100. When things don't work out as well as you hoped, think about the experience as a partial success rather than a complete failure. See what you can learn from the situation.
6. **The Survey Method:** Ask people questions to find out if your thoughts and attitudes are realistic. For example, if you feel that public speaking anxiety is abnormal and shameful, ask several friends if they ever felt nervous before they gave a talk.
7. **Define Terms:** When you label yourself 'inferior' or 'a fool' or 'a loser,' ask, "What is the definition of 'a fool'?" You will feel better when you realize that there is no such thing as 'a fool' or 'a loser.'
8. **The Semantic Method:** Simply substitute language that is less colourful and emotionally loaded. This method is helpful for 'should statements.' Instead of telling yourself, "I shouldn't have made that mistake," you can say, "It would be better if I hadn't made that mistake."
9. **Re-attribution:** Instead of automatically assuming that you are "bad" and blaming yourself entirely for a problem, think about the many factors that may have contributed to it. Focus on solving the problem instead of using up all your energy blaming yourself and feeling guilty.
10. **Cost-Benefit Analysis:** List the advantages and disadvantages of a feeling (like getting angry when your plane is late), a negative thought (like "No matter how hard I try, I always screw up"), or a behaviour pattern (like overeating and lying around in bed when you're depressed). You can also use the cost benefit analysis to modify a self-defeating belief such as, "I must always try to be perfect."