

# Calm *Thoughts*

How to understand the link between thoughts and feelings, identify unhelpful thinking styles, and learn more helpful ways of coping



## What is a thought?

A thought can be a word, an image, an idea, a memory or even a sound. They are automatic and pop into our minds spontaneously throughout the day. Thoughts can feel very real. In fact we tend to automatically believe our thoughts, usually not stopping to question them. And the more we think something, the more we can be convinced our thoughts are true. They can be persistent, they seem to repeat over and over, and the more they repeat, the more believable they can seem.



## Why do thoughts matter?

Why do our thoughts matter when we are talking about our emotional distress? Let's consider this example:

*You are walking in to work one morning. Across the car park you see a colleague, whom you know well. You wave and say "good morning!" but they keep walking.*



## What might go through your head?

Possible thought	Potential responses
"They are ignoring me"	Annoyed Confront them in work
"I have done something wrong"	Worry, anxiety Avoid them in work, try to figure out what I've done, think about situation all day
"They didn't see me"	No change in emotion Try saying hello again, make a joke of it at work later that day

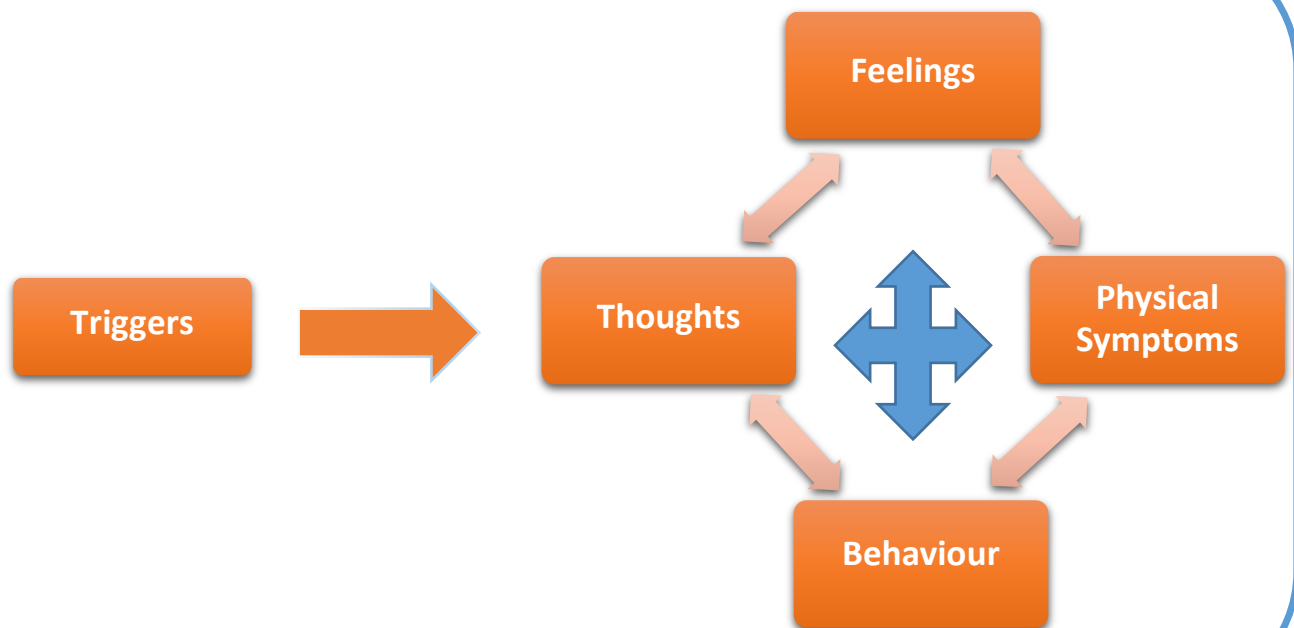
**So in this same situation we could find ourselves thinking in different ways, and the way that we think could make this situation more or less distressing for us in terms of how we feel. Our thoughts are extremely important in influencing our emotions and our behaviour.**

## Interpretation is the key

It is often not the event which causes an emotion but the meaning we give that event – what we **think** about it.








Remember the CBT model? Whenever we experience an emotion, there is a thought connected to it. Our thoughts affect how we feel ... and how we feel affects our thoughts.



We are learning that situations can trigger different thoughts. How we think can then have a knock-on effect on how we feel both emotionally and physically. So when we feel anxious we may start noticing our heart rate picking up or a tight feeling in our stomach, for example. How we think and feel can then affect how we behave ... which can influence what happens in the situation and how we feel and think ... and so on! We can find ourselves in a tricky trap that we don't know how to get out of. For further information on our physical reactions and behaviours, see our 'Calm Body' and 'Calm Behaviours' sessions.

## Common unhelpful thinking styles

There are certain styles of thinking that can feed our distress. We know that when we are feeling distressed we can find ourselves thinking in these ways more often. Do you identify with any of them?

Thinking Style	Example
<p><b>All or Nothing</b></p> <p>This is when we are thinking in black and white terms. Either things are right or wrong, good or bad. There is no space for grey areas.</p> 	<p>"I've got to do it perfectly or else it will be a complete failure."</p>
<p><b>Mental Filter</b></p> <p>This is when we filter information. Usually we will filter out the positive information and hold on to the negatives.</p> 	<p>Getting 75% on a test and focusing on the 25% you didn't get.</p>
<p><b>Jumping to Conclusions</b></p> <p>Here we either assume that we know what others are thinking or we make predictions about what will happen in the future.</p> 	<p>If a friend doesn't call you, you assume that they don't like you and think you are boring.</p>
<p><b>Emotional Reasoning</b></p> <p>This is when we base our interpretation of a situation (or our self) on how we are feeling.</p> 	<p>"I feel anxious. That means something is definitely going to go wrong."</p>
<p><b>Labelling</b></p> <p>Labelling ourselves, in overall terms.</p> 	<p>"I am a failure" in spite of there being lots of evidence against this.</p>

Thinking Style	Example
<p><b>Overgeneralising</b> We take one piece of evidence from the past or present and then use this to judge future situations.</p> 	<p>“I didn’t get that job. I will never get a job.”</p>
<p><b>Disqualifying the Positives</b> Discounting or minimising the positives in any situation or explaining away success or positives as if they are not important.</p> 	<p>Receiving a compliment and saying “Oh, they were just being nice.”</p>
<p><b>Catastrophising</b> Thinking of the worst case scenario.</p> 	<p>Your boss wants to talk to you and you think “I will lose my job.”</p>
<p><b>Shoulds and musts</b> These tend to put pressure on us or set unrealistic demands.</p> 	<p>Thinking you should never get things wrong, you must do everything perfectly and you must not let anyone down.</p>
<p><b>Personalisation</b> Blaming yourself for things or taking on too much responsibility.</p> 	<p>If someone is in a bad mood you think “What have I done?” or if something goes wrong you think “That was all my fault”.</p>

**Remember these patterns of thinking are very common – we all do them! However, we know that the more we think in these ways, the more they can feed our distress. So, if we can begin to notice these it can help us to calm our distress.**

## Worry and Rumination

Worry and rumination are particularly repetitive forms of thinking that can increase distress.

**Worry** – This is where we think about possible future negative events that might happen. We tend to ask ourselves “what if” questions and mentally “discuss” these possible negative events over and over again in our minds, without coming up with any solutions, leading to feelings of stress and anxiety.

Examples of worry thoughts:

- What if I lose my job?
- What if a loved one gets sick?
- What if I get sick?

**Rumination** – This is when we focus on negative thoughts, feelings, and problems from the past, what may have caused them, and their consequences. You might find yourself thinking about the past, taking an “if only” outlook.

Both rumination and worry can be very repetitive, leading to a feeling of ‘stuckness’. These ways of thinking are unhelpful when they get in the way of problem solving. Like a car stuck in the mud, if we continue to ruminate or worry over and over again, it won’t get us anywhere but stuck further into the mud.



**Let's pause and reflect.** What happens to your thoughts when you start to feel distressed? Does this add to your distress? How does your thinking change?



## **Calm your thoughts**

Hopefully you are now becoming more aware of the role of thoughts in your experience of stress, and the problematic patterns of thinking that can make stress worse. This section of the workbook looks at some skills that we can learn to help change our thinking patterns. If we can change how we think about situations, it can reduce our stress.

We will look at the following strategies in turn:

### **Step 1: Slow down and stand back**

### **Step 2: Challenge your thoughts**

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### **Step 1: Slow down and stand back**



The first step to managing our thoughts is to identify them. This can be difficult! After all, when we feel distressed, our emotions can feel so intense it is easy to get caught up in them. Although noticing our thoughts can be difficult, we can practise this and over time get to know our problematic thinking better.

#### **So how do we notice our thoughts?**

A simple but helpful way of doing this can be to write our thoughts down: on a notepad, on your phone, on your computer. It doesn't matter. In doing this we can instantly step back, see them written down in black and white, and have the chance to consider them rather than just taking them as fact.

What is important to remind ourselves is that thoughts are just thoughts. They are products of our own minds, not hard-and-fast 'facts', especially where feelings of stress could be influencing our view of things and taking us down the path of unhelpful thinking styles.

In stepping back we are trying to observe our thoughts, rather than be so focused on them.

Another way to imagine this is like viewing our thoughts as clouds passing through a vast sky, or leaves floating down a stream, which we can observe as they come and go. We can sit back on the riverbank and notice our thoughts as they flow past us and then carry on down the river. We can watch as the clouds gather and the rain falls, then observe as they gradually disperse and a new weather pattern moves in. No matter how bad the storm might feel in the moment, the clouds will always keep on moving.



From this stepped-back place, it gives us a chance to see our thoughts more clearly as what they are: continually moving processes of our mind. By doing this, we can realise that we have more choice in how we respond to them.

## Step 2: Challenge your thoughts

### Fact vs Feeling

We tend to accept our thoughts as absolutely true and act as if they are facts. Have you ever really strongly believed a thought which turned out **not** to be true? The same can be said for our emotions: when we *feel* bad, it can give us the impression that everything *is* bad.



It is helpful to acknowledge that our thoughts are not facts: **they are an interpretation.** To help us work out fact from feeling, we can take the following approach to help us balance our thoughts, and reduce the intensity of our distress.

#### ➤ Finding the evidence

- First, use step 1: slow down and stand back to help identify any thoughts you are having in this moment.
- Identify a thought you want to challenge. Notice how it makes you feel.
- Come up with as much evidence as possible to support the thought (that it is true).
- Then come up with as much evidence as possible that goes against the thought (that it might not be true or not 100% true all the time).
- Taking all evidence into account, see if you can come up with a more balanced, realistic thought.

Below is an example of how we can use this approach to think in a more calm and rational way. We have also included a worksheet at the end of this session with more information to help you, as we are aware that challenging your thoughts can be difficult at first.

Situation	Emotions	Negative Thoughts	Evidence For	Evidence Against	Balanced Thought	Emotion now
Haven't visited a close friend who is going through a hard time	Guilty (90%) Sad (70%) Anxious (75%)	I am a bad person	Haven't visited friend in over 6 months	Life has been very busy since becoming a dad. I don't have as much free time. I haven't been feeling myself, as I've been under a lot of stress. I've pulled back because of this. I have called and texted.	I'm not a bad person. They're my friend, and I'm sure they'll understand why I've been a bit more distant.  He did suggest meeting up for a walk, so perhaps we could try this.	Guilty (30%)  Sad (40%)  Anxious (25%)

In this example the situation is that Frank has not visited his close friend Bill, who was going through a hard time. How he felt was guilty, sad and anxious. We introduced you to the idea of SUDs in our first session and he has used them here to rate how intense these feelings were. You can see that he has rated his feelings of guilt at 90%, sadness at 70% and anxiety at 75%. Often we will feel more than one emotion at the one time, and guilt is the strongest one here.

So what is making Frank feel so guilty? It is the thought that he is a "bad person". Here you can see he has taken this thought and considered the evidence that supports it first of all: "Haven't visited friend in over 6 months". Then he has taken some time to consider the evidence against this thought being true, e.g. how busy and stressed he has been himself recently.

By weighing up all the evidence, he has managed to find a more balanced and realistic thought that allows his distress levels to reduce. They may not have reduced to zero – that's unrealistic – but they have reduced.



## Worry Time

Worry can happen at any time. Sometimes we can identify triggers, but sometimes that can be difficult. Worrying can take up a large part of our day and really get in the way of the things that are important to us. Sometimes it can feel like worry is in control of us and there is nothing we can do to stop it. **Worry time** gives us a strategy to approach our worry differently.

Worry time is about setting aside some time in which you allow yourself to worry as much as you like. The rest of the time, however, we want to postpone the worry and let it go. In doing so we can learn a bit about how we can manage our worry and feel more in control of it. Here's how worry time works:

➤ **Step 1: Set your worry time**

Choose a particular time, place, and length of time for worrying. Try to keep this to less than 30 minutes. The time, place and duration should be the same each day, if this is possible. Try not to make this right before you go to bed!

➤ **Step 2: Postpone your worry during the day**

As soon as you become aware of a worry throughout the day, see if you can postpone it until your worry time. Try writing the worry down on a notebook or on your phone. Then think about the strategies we have covered so far to help you re-focus your attention on what you were doing. This takes practice, and you will probably find that you have to work at re-focusing your attention many times throughout the day.

➤ **Step 3: It's worry time!**

When your worry time arrives, settle yourself down at the place you had planned and take some time to reflect on the worries. Look over your list. Are all your worries still seeming important? Had you forgotten about any of them? Do any still worry you? If they do, is there anything you can do about them right now? Can you problem-solve them?

If they no longer worry you, then disregard them. If there is nothing you can do about them, can you let them go? Maybe you need to work through them (problem solving, thought challenging): spend your worry time doing this. If you reach the end of your worry time and there are still worries to work through, place them on your list for the next day. Don't extend your worry time!

## Summary

This session has focused on understanding how stress affects our thinking, but also how our thinking can influence how we feel. We have looked at ways in which we can get to know our unhelpful thinking styles better and ways in which we can begin to challenge these patterns to help us manage our distress cycle.

Challenging our thinking isn't easy, so if you do try out our recommended strategies, please be patient and kind with yourself.



# Calm Distress Worksheets

We invite you to try the following worksheets which may assist in improving your mood and wellbeing.



# Worksheet 1

## Fact vs Feeling

**Step 1** – Identify the thought you are going to challenge

**Step 2** – Look for evidence that supports your thoughts

When looking for evidence for your thoughts:

- Try to only list factual evidence that supports your thoughts, not interpretations or assumptions.
- Check whether you are using any unhelpful thinking styles – e.g., am I jumping to conclusions? Using emotional reasoning? If so, this tells us the thought is likely not to be a fact, so be clear with the information you include.

**Step 3** – Look for any evidence against your thoughts.

This is often the most difficult part, especially if we have been thinking in a stressed/negative way for some time. Our mind is likely to either not notice this evidence or to quickly discount it. Remember, this is not our doing – it's how our brains work! Below are some helpful questions we can ask ourselves to practise noticing the evidence we have against our unhelpful thinking.

- Have I had any experiences that show this thought is not true all the time?
- Have I ever been in a similar situation in the past where my thoughts were not true?
- If a friend was in this situation, what would I say to them?
- What might a friend say to me if I told them this thought?
- Do I ever think of this situation differently?
- Is there any information that I am ignoring or discounting? Any strengths or positives that I have not considered?
- Am I blaming myself for something that I cannot control?

**Step 4** – Weigh up the evidence for and against unhelpful thoughts.

Try to look at both columns and weigh up the information you have.

Hopefully this will allow you to come up with a more balanced and realistic thought for the situation.

Situation	Emotions	Negative Thoughts	Evidence For	Evidence Against	Balanced Thought	Emotions now



Situation	Emotions	Negative Thoughts	Evidence For	Evidence Against	Balanced Thought	Emotions now



## Worksheet 2

### Worry Time



➤ **Step 1: Set your worry time**

Time:

Place:

How long for? (We would recommend 30 minutes maximum)

➤ **Step 2: Postpone your worry**

Make a note of any worry thoughts you have throughout the day and use other Calm Distress strategies to create some space around these until Worry Time. You can write down worry thoughts in the space below.

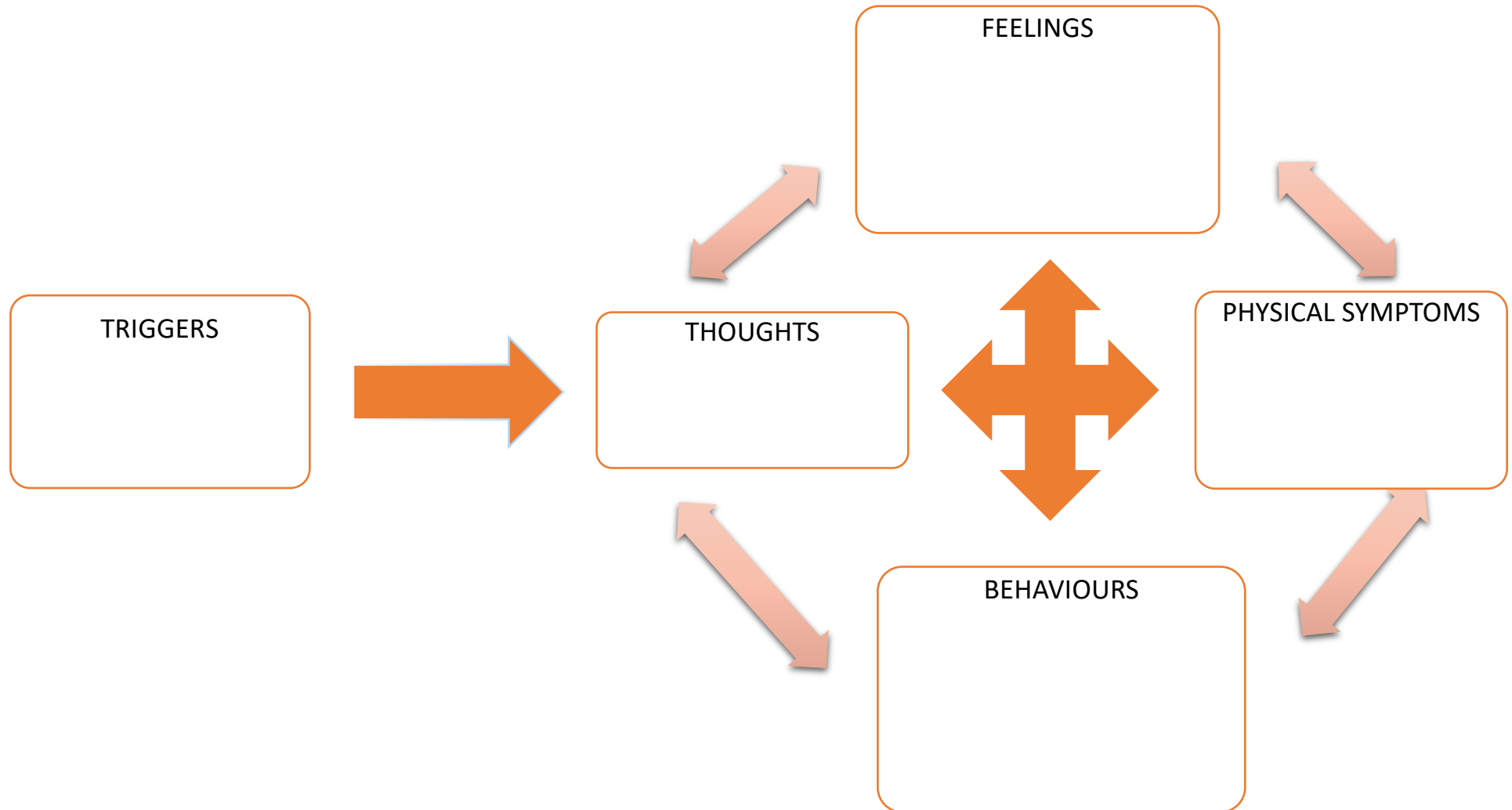
➤ **Step 3: It's worry time!**

Look over your list. Are all your worries still seeming important? Had you forgotten about any of them? Do any still worry you? If they do, is there anything you can do about them right now? Can you problem-solve them?

If they no longer worry you, then disregard them. If there is nothing you can do about them, can you let them go? Maybe you need to work through them (problem solving, thought challenging): spend your worry time doing this. If you reach the end of your worry time and there are still worries to work through, place them on your list for the next day – don't extend your worry time!

# Worksheet 3

## My CBT cycle



## Notes

Please use this page to note down any thoughts or information that you would like to remember

