Managing Our Thinking
Managing our thinking

We are always thinking. Our minds never stop. Most of our thoughts pop into our heads automatically throughout the day and can be words, images or memories. Our thoughts are often so automatic we tend not to notice them and we can assume that they are true. However, thoughts are just thoughts and they are not always true or accurate.

It is only when we stop and take time to notice, that we realise our minds are constantly active - daydreaming about lunch or our plans for the weekend or worrying about getting all our errands done.

Although automatic, our thoughts affect how we feel and what we do. This is illustrated in the example below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Emotions or Feelings</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary is in bed at night and she hears a noise</td>
<td>She thinks “It's a burglar”</td>
<td>Scared, Anxious</td>
<td>Hides in her wardrobe so the burglar doesn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>downstairs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>find her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary then realises she left the window open</td>
<td>She thinks “I've left the window open and the neighbour's cat has come in”</td>
<td>Irritated, Frustrated</td>
<td>Goes downstairs to shut the window and put the cat out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and the recycling on the counter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see from the example, the way Mary thought about the situation had a big impact on how she then felt and what she did.

It is also important to note that our behaviour, the physical sensations we experience and the way we feel emotionally can also influence the way we think. They are all inter-connected.

Lots of things influence our thinking: our physical health, changes in our body (hunger, tiredness, increases in pain etc.), our emotional state or our mood, who we are with, our past experiences, or what we are paying attention to. In addition, our mind develops shortcuts or ways of thinking that become habits over time.
This is often very helpful, but sometimes our minds can play tricks on us and bias our thinking without us even realising it. You may have heard of **rose-tinted spectacles** – where someone has an optimistic outlook on life and does not notice the negatives as much.

We are **all** biased in some ways in our thinking. Our thinking influences what we notice and then has an effect on how we feel and how we react to situations (our behaviour and what we do).

When someone is feeling down or depressed we know that it is very much like they are seeing the world through **grey-tinted spectacles**. They have a greater tendency to perceive things in a pessimistic fashion and ignore more positive information.

Below are some more examples of how our mind can trick us and bias our thinking. Have a look and see if any apply to you.

**All or Nothing Thinking**
This is where things are only ever seen as black or white and there are no shades of grey. One mistake is thought of as total failure.

*For example:*
- I have to do a perfect job or there is no point doing it at all.

**Overgeneralisation**
Here, one unfortunate event leads us to think that it will happen every time. However, realistically there is no reason for seeing one instance as proving a rule.

*For example:*
- Nothing **ever** goes right for me (when one small misfortune has happened).

**Jumping To Conclusions**
Here we become completely convinced that something is true without looking at all the evidence.

*For example:*
- I must be boring, because my friend cut our telephone conversation short.

**Double-Standards**
Here we expect a higher standard from ourselves than we would from anyone else. We can be more forgiving with others in the same situation than we are with ourselves.

*For example:*
- I should be able to do what I used to (ignoring that in the past you were younger, possibly fitter and did not have the same level of pain as you do now). At the same time you praise a friend for having managed to do just a few of the things he’d planned to do.

**Predicting the Future**
Here we think we know what will happen, without questioning our prediction, assuming this is the only possible thing that can happen.

*For example:*
- If I go to the party, nobody will talk to me.
Mind Reading
Making instant judgements about what we think other people are thinking or feeling when there is no evidence – it just seems right. We may constantly expect negative evaluation from others. This often involves imagining that other people think or feel the same way that we do about things.

For example:
• He thinks I am stupid (when someone has asked if they can help you)

Personalisation
This is the tendency to relate everything that is happening around us to ourselves. Everything that goes wrong we attribute to ourselves. It can often lead to guilty or anxious feelings. We continually make comparisons between ourselves and other people. This also includes assuming responsibility for events beyond our control.

For example:
• Two people laughed when I walked in the room. They were probably commenting to each other on my appearance.

Emotional Reasoning
This involves taking your feelings as facts.

For example:
• I feel afraid so there must be some real danger.
Identifying your Thoughts

The thoughts we are most interested in, are those which cause us to experience strong emotions. These bothersome thoughts are highly charged emotionally.

It can be difficult, at first, to identify our bothersome thoughts particularly because they are automatic and we often don’t realise we have them at the time. A helpful way to start identifying our thoughts is to keep a Thought Diary. Below are a number of questions that it can be useful to ask ourselves in order to identify our bothersome thoughts:

- What was going through my mind just before I started to feel this way?
- What does this say about me?
- What does this mean about me? My life? My future?
- What am I afraid might happen?
- What is the worst thing that could happen if this is true?
- What does this mean about how the other person feels/thinks about me?
- What does this mean about the other person or people in general?
- What images or memories do I have in this situation?

You can use the blank thought diaries provided to start trying to identify your bothersome thoughts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Moods</th>
<th>Thoughts (images)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who were you with?</td>
<td>Describe each mood in one word. Rate the intensity of mood (0-100%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were you doing?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When was it?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where were you?</td>
<td></td>
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Reducing the power of negative thoughts

I’ve Identified My Bothersome Thoughts – so now what do I do?

Once we are more aware of the thoughts that are influencing our mood and behaviour, there are a number of strategies we can use to reduce the impact of these thoughts.

Getting distance from your thoughts

The Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) approach states that you and your thoughts are not the same thing. Therefore, to reduce the power our thoughts have over our mood and behaviour it is important to develop distance from our thoughts and look at them for what they are and not what they say they are. In ACT the term “Cognitive Defusion” is used to describe the act of getting distance from your thoughts. Defusion is the ability to watch our thoughts come and go without attaching ourselves to them. Defusion allows us to have thoughts without putting those thoughts in the driver’s seat of our life.

What defusion can offer is the means to gain enough distance from our thoughts to make choices on our own, without the influence of the ever-buzzing mind machine at our back. Once we learn to notice our thoughts and look at them instead of from them, we can make choices about our behaviour and therefore, our life.

A number of Defusion Techniques are described below:

Kick your Buts

When we use the word “but,” we usually intend to indicate opposition to a statement. For example, we might say “I would love to go for a drink with you tonight, but I am in so much pain.” In this case, the word “but” is telling us that there is no practical way for we to go for a drink because of pain.

For the next couple of days, track your “but” thoughts and statements and list them below.

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Now let’s see what happens when we simply replace the word “but” with “and.” In the example above this would mean saying “I would love to go for a drink with you tonight and I am in so much pain.”

As an experiment, rewrite your “but” statements in the section below.

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What did this do to your “but” statements? How did this affect their meaning? Could it be possible that these “and” statements are as believable as the “but” statements you started with? If this was true – and these new “and” statements are equally as true as your original “but” statements – what would that mean for you in your life? Using the word “and” changes the meaning of the “but” statements. Using the word “and” in the original example about going for a drink suggests that the person can go for a drink and still be in pain.

If we could accept the validity of such “and” statements, how would that alter our lives? Take a few moments to think about this and perhaps write down some of your thoughts.

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Pushing my buttons

In the space below, write down the part of your body that causes you the most pain. Try to make this a short and concise phrase, such as “my back.”

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Now take a few minutes to write down all of the thoughts and feelings that come up when you say this phrase out loud or bring it to mind.

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Once you’ve done this, find a quiet space where you can be alone and say the phrase you wrote down aloud 100 times in a row without stopping. Just keep saying “my back” or whatever else you wrote down over and over again for two minutes.

When you say the words again and again, what happens to them? Do they still have the same effect on you as they did before? Do they bring up all the same psychological content while you’re repeating them over and over?

If you are like most people, the words will become slightly disassociated with the negative content they initially produced. In fact, most people who do this exercise end up feeling that the words sound odd or unfamiliar, or that they have no inherent meaning whatsoever. That’s because they don’t, they are just words.

**The Thought Observer**

Thinking is incredibly subtle. The mental word machine that we all have produces thoughts almost all the time.

For this exercise, find a street that’s fairly busy with traffic. Watch the cars go by and simply name them as they cross your line of vision. You can simply say to yourself, “There’s a Ford; there’s a mini; there’s a van,” and so on. Whatever identification system works for you is fine. How long are you able to do this without thinking about anything but the passing cars?

If you are like most of us, you can only go a very short time simply watching and naming the cars without thinking of anything else. As you watch the cars pass, many different thoughts are likely to come up. Perhaps you see a red Ferrari and think, “That is a great looking car, I wish I could afford one of those”. Or perhaps you see a Berlingo Van and you think “I could use a van like that to move some old furniture I have lying about, but I probably wouldn’t be able to lift it anyway because of my pain”. If you watch carefully you’ll notice that your mind comes up with all kinds of wonderful and bizarre little thoughts.

To take the exercise one step further, take a few moments to write down all the thoughts that come to mind. You don’t have to concentrate on anything in particular. Just write whatever your mind comes up with.

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You probably found that many thoughts came to mind in that short space of time. Some might have been about your pain, others not. Now bring the street that you watched the passing cars on to your mind’s eye. Imagine that as you have a thought, you can simply attach it to one of the cars and watch it glide past. For example let’s say you had the thought “my pain ruins everything”. Mentally paint those words on the side of a car and watch it disappear down the street with the words attached. Watch your thoughts come up, and watch them roll away down the street. Go ahead and do this with the thoughts that are coming up right now. If you are thinking “wow, this is really a silly exercise,” go ahead and put that on the side of a car and watch it go by. On the other hand, if you are thinking “this is really cool and I’m really good at it,” put it on the side of a car and watch it go by as well. Do this for a few minutes and watch your mind.
While watching your mind, see if you can find the point when you stop watching the thoughts go by on cars and start looking through the lens of the thoughts themselves. This is the point at which you are sinking in to the content generated by your mind, and it happens all the time. Do you find yourself praising or criticising yourself on your performance in this exercise? If so, you’ve fallen into a very common mental trap. Any attempt to judge your performance is only your mind generating more thoughts. Do you find yourself becoming caught up in thoughts about pain? Again, this a common trap. If this is the case, don’t be hard on yourself. Rather, try to take those thoughts, paint them on cars, and watch them disappear down the street. This exercise for observing your thoughts can be an incredibly powerful cognitive defusion tool.

**Calling it a thought**
When we have a thought such as “I am no good at this,” or “I am sure it will be terrible if I go there,” it can feel very real. We can believe our thoughts 100%. But what if we call it a thought? “I am having the thought that I am no good at this.” “I am having the thought that it will be terrible if I go there.” The thought loses some of its power when we notice it is only a thought. Have a go.

**Thoughts are not causes**

Often our thoughts tell us what to do. Sometimes this is not a direct instruction, but instead it is implied in the thought. The ‘but’ statements above are examples of this. Others are even less obvious. One example would be, “This pain is ruining my life. I can’t do all the things I used to”. Contained in this thought is the instruction that “I can’t do any of the things I used to do until the pain is gone or controlled”. However, this thought is just a thought. Are you going to take it at face value?

Have there been times when you’ve had a thought which has later been proved wrong by your experience? I’m sure most people at one time or another will have been invited on a night out but they found themselves thinking that they were too tired or too fed up to bother going. Perhaps because they felt they had to go, they went and then were surprised to find themselves having a great time. Have you had this experience?

What this shows is that you don’t have to do what your thoughts tell you because they are not always right and can’t cause things to happen. Ultimately, you decide what you want to do.

This can be demonstrated quite simply by telling yourself over and over again that you can’t raise your right arm, whilst at the same time moving your arm up and down.

Obviously, this is a very simple and silly thing to do, but it makes the point that our thoughts aren’t in charge of us. We can disobey them. Over the next few weeks, try and notice when you’re telling yourself what you can and can’t do. When you do spot this, try deciding that you’re not going to listen and that you’re going to do the complete opposite.
Summary

• We are always thinking, our minds never stop

• Most of our thoughts pop into our heads automatically throughout the day

• Thoughts can be words, images or memories

• Thoughts are just thoughts and they are not always true or accurate

• Our thoughts can influence the way we feel and what we do

• It can be helpful to reduce the impact of our bothersome thoughts on our mood and behaviour – this can be done by learning strategies to get some distance from our thoughts

• These strategies require practice, so don’t be too hard on yourself if it takes a bit of time to master them