



Embrace Healthy Thinking

CHANGING YOUR THOUGHTS
TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Did you know that if you change your thoughts, you literally could change your life? Most people do not realize that it is the way we think that determines our degree of happiness. Most people look for happiness outside of themselves, but nothing really ends up making us happy if we are not thinking clearly between our ears.

Despite the seemingly romantic '60s song made popular by Blood, Sweat & Tears, "You Make Me So Very Happy," happiness is really an inside job. No one can do that for you. Sure, people can *help* you to be happy, but the keys to our happiness lie within us, not in people or things outside of ourselves. Other people do help us considerably, but if you have negative self-perceptions and live life on the defensive, it's unlikely you will be very happy no matter how many people think you're great. So a more accurate song title would be "I'm So Very Happy Being with You." Maybe it wouldn't be as catchy, but it would be a lot more accurate!

This chapter will expand upon the cognitive behavioral therapy approaches we've touched on so far and draw on rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) to identify your feelings, separate them from your thoughts, and learn skills to change your thoughts to change your life. Albert Ellis laid the foundation of REBT in the 1950s, and a decade later Aaron Beck initially developed CBT in his work on understanding the origins of depression (1967). CBT has become the most widely embraced therapeutic orientation in the Western world—perhaps the

entire world. This orientation has helped millions of people with symptoms of low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety challenge their thinking habits to feel better and lead happier lives.

How about you? Are you ready to embrace the time-tested teachings from the great thinkers in the field of psychotherapy to change your thoughts to change your life?

11: Differentiate Thoughts from Feelings

“You feel the way you do right now because of the thoughts you are thinking at this moment.”

—David D. Burns

After months of looking for a new job after having been let go from his former position, thirty-six-year-old Douglas felt a mixture of excitement and dread his first week back to work at a new company. Feelings of relief were mixed with fears of losing this job too. The emotions he expressed were all over the place:

“I feel like maybe I can’t handle this job!”

“I feel I am going to fail.”

“I feel like they’ll expect more than I can handle.”

“I feel like they will think I am not as good as I seemed at my interview.”

What do you notice about these statements? Douglas is stating his fears and perceptions as if they were absolute facts. He is confusing truth with the stories he tells himself based on his self-doubts and fears. In other words, Douglas’s statements

confuse thoughts and feelings. Despite the fact that all his sentences start with “I feel,” those statements are not really feelings at all—they *are* thoughts! Underlying those thoughts are feelings of anxiety, fear, and panic. For example, the first statement in the list—“*I feel like maybe I can’t handle this job!*”—erroneously confuses thoughts and feelings. A more factual restatement would be: “*I am afraid I won’t do as well as they expect, and I am anxious about that.*”

In *The Self-Esteem Workbook*, Glenn Schiraldi (2001) views “making feelings facts” as a type of distorted thinking that leads to low self-esteem. The example he gives—“*I feel inadequate. I must be inadequate*”—shows the illogical reasoning of feelings being seen as factual conclusions.

So why is it so important to clarify thoughts from feelings? If you can’t tell them apart, you have no control over your moods. You can’t convince yourself not to feel a certain way, but you can challenge unhealthy thinking and convince yourself to try healthier ways of thinking, which in turn will help you feel better. You can learn to control your moods by identifying and controlling your thoughts.

When we get better at differentiating thoughts from feelings, we literally change our lives from the inside out by taking control of the thoughts that lead to difficult emotions. Can you appreciate how your life can be different if you are able to separate your thoughts from your feelings?

GIVE IT A TRY

Separating thoughts from feelings can be a learned skill if you take the following steps.

Step 1: Identify a difficult situation in your own life that causes you anxiety and emotional pain. Write down at least three feelings related to this situation that you would like to change. Ask yourself, *Are these feelings or thoughts?* For example, if you write, *I feel dumb and unlikable*, notice that this is actually a thought and rewrite it as such: *I think I am dumb and unlikable*.

Step 2: Continue rewriting all the statements that confuse feelings and thoughts. *I feel dumb*, for instance, would be replaced by *I do not think I am as knowledgeable as I would like to be, so I will make an effort to learn new things and read more*. Similarly, *I feel unlikable* can be clarified with *I feel lonely, as I have trouble connecting with others. I want to work on connecting with people who have things in common with me*.

Step 3: Notice how feelings based on healthier thoughts transform sadness, hopelessness, and loneliness to hopefulness, confidence, and optimism. Make a habit of doing this exercise regularly so you can catch your negative thoughts that you lump with your feelings and work toward separating them to see a situation more clearly. You can't change feelings directly, but you *can* change thoughts. And you can learn to be more solution-focused instead of problem-focused.

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Periodically review your list separating thoughts and feelings, adding to it when new thoughts and feelings come up. Train yourself to be a pro at separating your thoughts from your feelings as you transform problems into solutions.

12: Take Control of Your Thoughts

“Change the way you look at things and the things you look at change.”

—Wayne Dyer

People do not make us feel or think a certain way. When we blame our child for driving us crazy, a friend for making us mad, a coworker for making us upset, or bad weather for putting us in a bad mood, we make the mistake of assigning our thoughts and feelings to others rather than taking responsibility for ourselves. The truth is that our feelings cannot change by changing other people or external circumstances. Who is the only person you can change? You got it—yourself!

When we feel upset, depressed, or anxious, all too often we look for reasons outside of ourselves as to why we *feel* a certain way instead of focusing on how we *think* about what happens to us. In actuality, short of physical harm, no one or no situation has the power to make us feel anything. It is really our *perceptions* and *thoughts* about what happens that determine how we feel. To quote pastor and educator Charles Swindoll, “I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react to it.”

To underscore this point, here is a sampling of some comments my therapy clients have expressed to me:

“She makes me so mad!”

“This weather is bumming me out.”

“He makes me feel bad about myself.”

“My teenager is driving me crazy!”

“My boss makes me nervous.”

What do you notice about these statements? They all have one thing in common: they all blame personal feelings on events and people rather than on how we *think* about what is happening to us. Once you really believe that you're the only person you can change, you can reframe your thoughts into positive statements that are also more actionable. For example, *She makes me so mad!* can be rephrased as *I am mad when she criticizes me, and I am going to tell her that I will no longer visit if she continues to treat me rudely.*

Notice how a statement showing powerlessness can be turned into one that is empowering not only because it is factual, but also because it offers an actionable takeaway of what we can do to shift our focus from problems to solutions.

Are you ready to change your thoughts to change your moods and take control of your life?

GIVE IT A TRY

Let's first take a look at how a single negative thought can be very powerful.

Step 1: Fill a clear glass with water and put one drop of food coloring in it. Stir it around. Notice how quickly the water changes, even with just a single drop of coloring. Imagine that this drop represents a negative thought, such as *I'm fat* or *I'll never get over this*. As the water discolors, you can see how much power this drop has to color your water—just like a negative thought colors your world!

Step 2: Now add several drops of different colors to the glass, representing many negative thoughts. The water turns muddy, just like the hundreds of negative thoughts that permeate our mind every day, causing us to feel gloomy and dark.

Step 3: After you have filled your glass of water with five to ten drops representing your negative thoughts about yourself or others, get another fresh glass of water. This time add drops of clear water to represent healthier and more positive self-statements to challenge your irrational thoughts. Replace *I'm fat* with *I am fifteen pounds overweight, and I will develop strategies to lose the weight*. Replace *I'll never get over this* with *I will seek out a lot of support to help me get through this*. The water is no longer muddy—it's clear, just like your healthier thoughts that allow you to see things more clearly and accurately. Notice that these examples of rephrasing include actionable solutions to each problem.

Imagine what your life would be like if you took more control of your thoughts and changed negativity to positivity! With these steps, are you ready to challenge your negative thinking?

13: Identify Cognitive Distortions

“The primary cause of unhappiness is never the situation, but your thoughts about it. Be aware of the thoughts you are thinking.”

—Eckhart Tolle

“I am fat and unattractive.”

“I am a bad mother.”

“I will never get over this!”

“It’s awful that she said that to me!”

“They think I’m stupid.”

“He’s just trying to show me up!”

“I know I shouldn’t be so upset about it.”

What’s the common denominator in all these statements? Do you notice that although these statements are stated as absolute facts, they are really just interpretations? Do you notice that all these statements are extreme and blown out of proportion? Do you notice how negatively biased they are instead of being factual and descriptive?

If we cannot identify our destructive thinking habits, we will keep on upsetting ourselves with distorted thinking, which

affects all aspects of our lives. Those negative thoughts may lead to negative emotions, poor life adjustment, addictions, social isolation, and toxic relationships.

In chapter 2 the concept of cognitive distortions was introduced in order to understand how to eliminate perfectionistic thinking. Since this concept is so crucial to identifying and eliminating common errors in thinking, we will now explore more about them and how to change them. In addition to the eight types of cognitive distortions defined in chapter 2 (see tip #9), here are a few more categories of distortion that act as barriers to healthy thinking:

- **All-or-Nothing Thinking:** seeing the world in extremes, in terms of “all this” or “all that,” with no other in-between possibilities; example: *She hates me!*
- **Blaming:** taking on too much responsibility for things outside of our control; example: *It’s all my fault that my child is depressed.*
- **Magnification or Minimization:** exaggerating the import of common occurrences or, on the flip side, downplaying them too much to shield our vulnerability; examples: *It’s terrible that she is mad at me* and *It’s no big deal.*
- **Mental Filtering:** focusing on the negative aspects of a situation by filtering out the positives; example: *My ears are too big and make me look unattractive.*

- **Mind Reading:** making faulty assumptions about the thoughts, actions, or motivations of others; example: *She's trying to make me look stupid in our weekly meetings.*

Do you notice any self-limiting distortions that you tend to use? Don't you want to think in ways that will help you rather than hurt you?

GIVE IT A TRY

Identifying cognitive distortions helps us develop the objectivity to replace our distorted self-statements with more accurate assessments. This activity is adapted from the “triple column technique” of CBT therapist David Burns (2008).

Step 1: On a blank piece of paper or computer document, create three columns.

Step 2: Title the first column **Automatic Negative Thought**, then populate that column with an example of a troubling thought, such as: *I am fat and not as attractive as any of my friends. I'll never get it together!*

Step 3: Title the second column **Type of Cognitive Error**, then list underneath the type of cognitive distortion(s) this upsetting thought demonstrates. Applicable in this case are *All-or-Nothing Thinking, Magnification, Emotional Reasoning, and Labeling.*

Step 4: Title the third column **Rational Alternative Thought.**

Once you've noted the type of thinking errors that apply, it is easier to change the thought to a healthier option here. A more factual statement, which is not only free of cognitive distortions but is also an actionable step, would be *I would like to lose twenty pounds to feel better about my body, and it would make me feel more attractive.*

Step 5: With examples from your own life, observe how identifying the types of distortions and creating healthier alternatives will help you be more objective about your distorted thinking and develop more actionable alternatives.

By using the triple column technique, you are well on your way to changing your thoughts to change your life! Aren't you tired of having cognitive distortions fog your ability to see yourself and your life with clear vision?

14: Uncover Your Core Irrational Beliefs

“Change your thoughts and you change your world.”

—Norman Vincent Peale

People who do not feel good about themselves tend to interpret what happens to them in life in a self-deprecating and negative way. They tend to blame themselves when things go wrong and have little trouble finding evidence of how they screwed up or how they are not as good as others. They often live in fear of not getting approval from others, but paradoxically, they shy away from others and isolate themselves in fear of being hurt, rejected, or saying something wrong. It is as if they are looking at the world with tinted glasses—or glasses with the wrong prescription!

Do you tend to be self-critical, to be anxious about how others see you, and to interpret situations in a self-doubting way? If so, you will not be able to stop this pattern until you get to the bottom of what your core beliefs are that trigger your anxiety and negative perceptions. Until you uncover your *core irrational beliefs*, you will continue to be negatively triggered by people and events in your world.

Uncovering your core beliefs requires digging deeper into your thoughts. David Burns’s “vertical arrow technique” (1989) is very helpful in uncovering the core beliefs at the root of our problematic thoughts and feelings. This technique follows each

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thought with simple questions like “*Why is this important?*” and “*If this were true, what is causing me to be upset?*” This questioning will help you dig down to your core beliefs.

It works like this:

“I hope they like me.”



Q: “*Why is this important? What would it mean to me?*”

“It would be terrible if they did not like me.”



Q: “*If this were true, what is causing me to be upset?
What would it mean to me?*”

“I need them to approve of me since they are better than me.”



Q: “*If this were true, what is causing me to be upset?
What would it mean to me?*”

“It would mean I am inferior to others”



Q: “*If this were true, what is causing me to be upset?
What would it mean to me?*”

“It would mean I am a failure.”

You can see with this model how core irrational beliefs exaggerate the importance of approval from others. With each question, you go deeper and deeper into the core belief that you need to be liked in order to like yourself. Thus, if you keep focusing on wanting to be liked, without digging deeper to the core, you will be focusing your attention on the surface rather than on the real source of your feeling.

Don't you deserve to love yourself—really, really love yourself—despite what others think?

GIVE IT A TRY

Are you ready to dig deep to the core using the vertical arrow technique?

Step 1: Following the model above, identify a thought that is causing you distress. Can you then dig deeper? It might help to visualize a shovel, and with each question, imagine that you are digging deeper toward the root of the problem. Apply the same questions as above: *“Why is that so important to me? What would it mean to me if this were true?”*

Step 2: Keep asking these questions until you get to the bottom of your distressing thought and are able to uncover your core irrational belief. Do you see yourself as helpless, unlovable, or unworthy?

Step 3: After you dig deep to the core, ask yourself these questions:

- *How does the way I see myself reflect the way I see the world?*
- *Does my core belief lead me to see the world as intimidating and other people as judgmental?*
- *Do I have core irrational beliefs that taint my perceptions in my daily interactions?*
- *What do these beliefs say about my assumptions about my life and future?*

Step 4: Now replace the negative, irrational belief you identified with a more rational, factual thought. For example, replace *I'm a failure* with *Making mistakes or even failing at some things does not mean I am a failure. After all, the most successful people fail at times.* How does that change your core belief about yourself?

Remember that feeling good about yourself comes from within by digging deeper—it is not found in the opinions of others. Your worthiness does not have to be earned—you are worthy unconditionally!