

Dialling Down the Negativity Bias



Humans are sense-making creatures, and one way in which we try to make sense of the world is to create stories that we tell ourselves about what's happening. Whilst some of these stories are accurate, many are not (Seligman, 2011). However, over time they can become beliefs - the more stable and often unconscious assumptions we make about ourselves, other people and the world around us can be a powerful influence on how we feel and behave.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) uses this understanding to help people recognise 'triggers' in their lives, tune into the unhelpful stories that they tell themselves in times of stress and then challenge them by creating alternative stories that support a change in feelings and behaviours.

The aim of CBT is not to eliminate negative or upsetting emotions, but rather to develop healthy, realistic thoughts that enable us to respond to situations in an appropriate and healthy way, i.e. our responses are reasonable given the situation before us. The emphasis of CBT is on present-moment thinking rather than past or future experience, so mindfulness is a key supporting practice.

There are four steps to this practice:

1. UNDERSTAND YOUR TRIGGERS

It's helpful to be aware of situations that trigger unhelpful stories for you. Consider the questions below to help identify some of your 'triggers'.

- When did you last feel highly stressed?
- When were you faced with a conflict?
- Is there a recent, vivid time when you were faced with some news that made you anxious? Excited? Annoyed? Angry? Disappointed?
- What about in your interactions at home or at work? Is there a recent, vivid time when you were faced with a challenging situation?
- Can you think of a time when you didn't do as well as you'd hoped and it impacted your confidence or future performance?

2. IDENTIFY FAULTY THOUGHTS

It is important to be able to recognise faulty thinking in your stories and to dispute them effectively. If you have difficulty identifying your thoughts, focus on your feelings and ask, "Why am I feeling this now? What meaning does this situation have for me?"

Over the page are some examples of common patterns of 'faulty' thinking and what they can sound like on our 'internal radio' – the voice in our head that provides a constant commentary on our experiences.

STORY	FAULTY THINKING STYLE
'I make mistakes all the time'	Polarising and ignoring the middle ground, 'black and white'
'No-one ever treats me fairly'	Overgeneralising , 'everyone, everything, always'
'This is all my fault'	Feeling responsible for everything, ' personalising '
'Late for school again – I'm a bad parent!'	Filtering information so that it reinforces our negative beliefs
'George hasn't returned my 'phone call – he doesn't care about me'	Jumping to conclusions with limited evidence
'They've invited me for dinner, but I know they don't really enjoy my company'	Assuming we can ' read people's mind ' and know what they are thinking

It's important to remember that not EVERY thought is an unhelpful or maladaptive!

Just because a thought leads to an uncomfortable feeling doesn't mean it's inaccurate – negative emotions (fear, guilt, sadness, anger) can provide valuable information about what is going on in our context. Feelings and emotions are information and if we can use them as such, the negative ones can provide us with signals and motivation to change our behaviour.

Awareness and identification of faulty thinking is valuable, but to have a positive impact on our psychological health and general wellbeing we must go one step further by disputing them and taking action to try and improve the situation.

3. LOOK FOR ALTERNATIVES

Our brains don't have the capacity to process all the information that is available to us in every moment of every day. In fact, we can only process 40 bits of the of the 11 million pieces of information that our senses are receiving every second.

Because of this, we are only ever getting a very limited and filtered view of our environment and the 'reality' we experience is just one of millions of possibilities that could be constructed in any given second (Zimmermann, 1986). It just depends on where we have placed our attention and as a result, what bits of information our brain processes. By looking for alternatives we expand the information being processed and can move away from a fear-based perspective.

We can look for alternatives by using the following sentence starters to help dispute faulty thinking;

- An alternative and more accurate way to see this is...
- That's not entirely true because there's also evidence that...
- I need to put this in perspective; the most likely outcome is and I can do..... to help me deal with it.

4. INVEST IN THE BEST

As you open your mind to alternative stories to explain your challenge/situation, notice how the way you are feeling and what you feel able to do changes.

Which story serves you best in your situation for you to achieve the outcomes that you want? Which story boosts your resilience, enables you to engage with the situation and move forward constructively? Invest your attention and energy in this story and see what outcomes you achieve. What changes in your feelings, motivation, physical energy etc. when you consider your alternative story? Make some notes below about how you feel with each story.

With practice, you can use the CBT resilience skills quickly in daily life to disrupt your unhelpful stories that lead to painful emotions and unhelpful behaviours. Cognitive therapists recommend writing down thoughts as an effective way to clarify and reinforce more helpful and healthy ways of thinking and to facilitate pattern recognition.