

Session overview

This session is an opportunity to explore managing unhelpful or upsetting thoughts.

Information for practitioner

Working at changing our thoughts can be challenging as it feels as though thoughts come whether we want them or not. This session allows you and the young person to explore how we can change our thoughts, so they help us feel better and move forwards.

Pre-session action

Select a *“Looking after yourself”* exercise in advance for the close of the session.

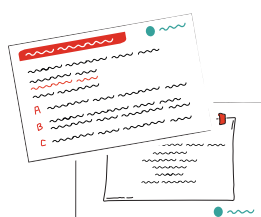
Resources needed for this session

- Big paper
- Pens
- Getting away from unpleasant thoughts worksheet
- How can we change the thought? worksheet

Session

Check in with the young person as to how they have been since your last session together. Are there any thoughts or feelings that you may need to reflect on and address before you begin this session?

Inform the young person what we are going to do in this session, sharing the overview.



Worksheets

Begin by working through the worksheets (Getting away from unpleasant thoughts and How can we change the thought?). There's lots in there, so allow time, encourage discussion and examples with plenty of thinking time to come up with different ways to deal with different thoughts. There is a more detailed version of these worksheets in the 13-16 age range that includes reframing, which may suit some young people better.



Paper and pens

Work together to create / rewrite any thoughts that you can challenge or change, using the questions from the worksheet. The young person might be happy to share their own thoughts, or you may discuss hypothetical thoughts.

This will take most of the session, and you can then invite the young person to record some of their unhelpful thoughts. It might be a specific thought that keeps happening or a specific behaviour, for example not going to a particular activity, and what thought prompts this.



Encourage them to record when it happened, where they were, who else was about, what was the situation. This can often help a young person spot any patterns in when the thoughts are coming (particular places or people for example). They might bring this to the next session to work on challenging those thoughts with you, or they may be happy to think of challenges as they go.



Reflection on this session

Thoughts are just thoughts. We are not our thoughts, and having a thought doesn't make it true. – With practice, we can have more control over our thoughts than we might realise and we don't just have to put up with them.



Looking after yourself exercise to close

Thoughts like buses would be a useful activity to end this session with if not already done – or revisited.

When something horrible has happened we sometimes find our thoughts and feelings about the event keep coming back, making us feel worse. When we see that this is happening, we can change these thoughts with a bit of effort and practice.

When you notice an unpleasant thought ask yourself:

Is this thought helping anything?

If the answer is no, then **try the ABC of negative thinking**:



Accept the thought. It's just a thought. Having a thought doesn't mean it's true. See it, name it ("oh, there's that horrid thought again!") and accept that it's there (and that it's not helpful – or even true).




Block it. Sometimes it's just enough to see it, see that it's unhelpful, and let it go. This can take practice. You may keep returning to your thought. But every time you tell your brain to let it go, your brain finds it a bit easier to do so. Try having an action to go with it – maybe a shake of the head (no I don't want this thought) or a flick of the hand (brush that thought away).



Change or challenge. If blocking works, there's no need to do any more – block it and get on. But sometimes it's good to challenge the thought and rewrite it into a different thought – a more useful one.

To change a thought, we can challenge it by asking questions or looking at it in a different way. Note, not every question/statement will be relevant to every thought:

- What evidence do I have for this thought?
 - Is this the only interpretation?
 - How likely is this to come true?
 - What are other possible outcomes?
 - What's the most likely thing to happen?
 - When has something like this worked out ok in the past?
 - Is there anything practical I can do?
 - What's more likely to make it ok?
 - What will I think in one week/month/year?
 - What has this actually affected?
 - Reset from now – every moment is a new moment.
 - Has anything been gained from this situation?
 - What am I pleased with/grateful for?
 - Is this something I can control?
 - I can let this go – it's not about me.
- I can only control my own thoughts and behaviours, not those of other people.
 - Do I really know what they are thinking?
 - Can I ask them rather than assume?
 - What would happen if I didn't...?
 - What is the other side of this belief?
 - What would someone else say about this?
-  **Write down all the different possibilities, however unrealistic.**
- What would it look like if this went really well?
 - Can I ask someone to help?
 - What ideas are in the middle?
 - What/where would be 'good enough'?
 - What small change could I make?



Finally we can have some mantras that allow us to feel more accepting of the situation:

This too will pass.

I can only do my best.

It won't feel like this forever.

I can't control anyone else's behaviour, and I can decide my own.

It is what it is.

I've done all I can for now.

Everything will be ok. Everything is ok.

I am brave. I am strong. I have the power to accept what is happening right now.