

CHAPTER FIVE



# Automatic thoughts

The thoughts that quickly pop into your head throughout the day are called **automatic thoughts**. They provide you with a running commentary about what happens and what you do. We have these thoughts all the time, and they are important because they affect what we do and how we feel.

## Me, what I do and my future

The automatic thoughts we are most interested in are those that are about **YOU**. They might be about any of the following.

### ▶ How you see yourself



- ▶ I'm clever.
- ▶ I'm not very good at getting on with people.
- ▶ I'm good-looking.

### ▶ The way you judge yourself



- ▶ Everything I do goes wrong.
- ▶ I'm hopeless at sport.
- ▶ I did really well in my maths test.

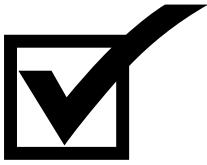
### ▶ The way you see the future



- ▶ One day I'll settle down.
- ▶ I'm never going to be happy.
- ▶ There are plenty of things I can do when I leave school.

These are the building blocks that form the overall picture of how you see yourself. These thoughts shape what you think about yourself, how you judge what you do, and what you expect will happen in the future.

These thoughts can be **positive**.



- ▶ I played well in that game.
- ▶ I had a really nice time with my friends tonight.
- ▶ Mike seems to like me.

These positive thoughts might **encourage** you to:

- ▶ continue training and playing sport
- ▶ make another arrangement to go out with your friends
- ▶ invite Mike round and spend more time with him.

Automatic thoughts can also be **negative**.



- ▶ That's the worst I've ever played.
- ▶ None of my friends are talking to me tonight.
- ▶ I'm not sure, but I don't think Mike likes me.

Negative automatic thoughts might make you **stop or avoid** doing things. You might start to:

- ▶ miss training sessions
- ▶ become less interested in going out and seeing friends
- ▶ avoid going to places if you know that Mike might be there.

We have a mixture of negative and positive automatic thoughts. Most people are able to see **both sides** and end up making **balanced decisions and judgements**.

Others find it harder to think about things positively. They seem to look through **negative glasses** and will only see and hear the things that are not right.



- ▶ Their thoughts tend to be very negative.
- ▶ They find it hard to think, hear or see anything good about themselves.
- ▶ They do not recognize any positive skills.
- ▶ They have a gloomy view about their future and do not believe that they could be successful.

For some people, this way of thinking takes over. Their automatic thoughts become mainly negative.

## Why do I listen to my negative thoughts?

To understand this we need to learn a little more about negative automatic thoughts. They have a number of things in common.

- ▶ **Automatic** – they just happen. They pop up without you having to think of them.
- ▶ **Distorted** – when you stop and check you will find that they don't really fit all the facts.
- ▶ **Continuous** – you do not choose to have them and they can't easily be turned off.
- ▶ **Seem true** – they seem to make sense so you accept them as true without stopping to challenge and question them.
- ▶ Because our automatic thoughts seem very reasonable, we **listen** to them.
- ▶ We become **very familiar** with them because we hear them so often.
- ▶ The more we hear them, the more we **believe** and accept that they are true.



Our negative thoughts are like a tape being played in our head.

- ▶ The thoughts go round and round.
- ▶ The tape never gets changed.
- ▶ The volume is never turned down.
- ▶ The tape is never heard by anyone else.

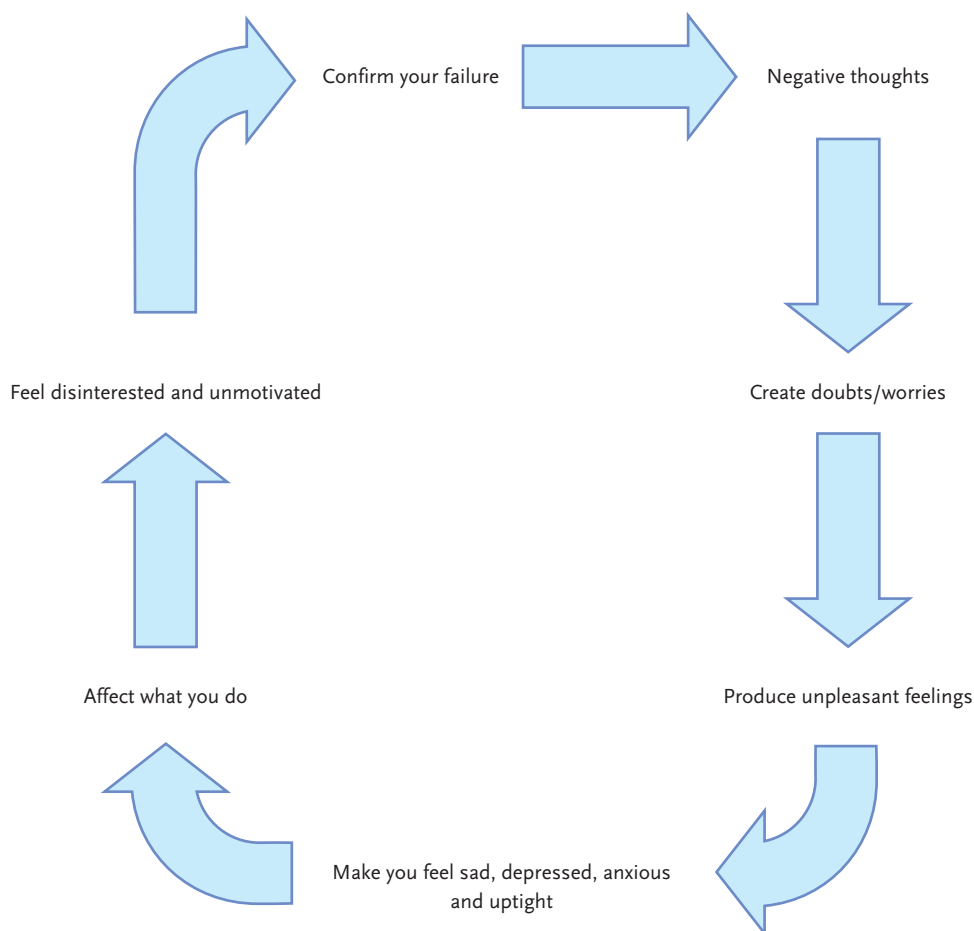
## The negative trap

These negative automatic thoughts become unhelpful and we end up becoming caught in a negative trap.

- ▶ Our negative thoughts make us feel unpleasant.
- ▶ Our unpleasant feelings prevent us from doing things.
- ▶ Doing less gives us more time to think about all the things that are going wrong.
- ▶ This confirms our negative thoughts.

And so it goes on and on and on.

# The negative cycle



## ‘Hot’ thoughts



We have automatic thoughts all the time. However, we need to identify our ‘hot’ thoughts – those that occur most often and those that are the strongest. In order to do this we need the help of the **Thought Tracker**.

As we have already seen, our automatic thoughts usually seem to be fairly reasonable. We often accept them as true without stopping to question them. In fact, we often don’t even notice them. We need the **Thought Tracker** to help us to identify those thoughts that are negative and biased. The **Thought Tracker** will help us to check whether we are seeing the whole story or whether we are only focusing on one small part of what is going on.



The best place to start is to look for those thoughts that stir up the strongest feelings. These are the **'hot'** thoughts. Think about those times when you really notice a change in how you feel. Try to identify what thoughts are going through your mind when you feel like this. The following questions may help.

- ▶ What were you thinking **as you started** to feel this way?
- ▶ What were your thoughts when this feeling **became really strong**?
- ▶ What did you think **was going to happen**?
- ▶ How did you think this **would end**?
- ▶ What did you think **other people might say** about what happened?

### ▶ Sara becomes uptight

Sara was waiting at the bus stop when she noticed herself suddenly becoming very uptight and tearful. The **Thought Tracker** helped Sara to identify the **'hot'** automatic thoughts that were racing through her mind at the time.

- ▶ *What were you thinking as you started to feel this way?* Sara was thinking about the boy she had met at the disco last night. She liked him and was looking forward to meeting him again. Sara then started to worry that he wouldn't turn up.
- ▶ *What were your thoughts when your feelings became very strong?* Sara was now thinking of all the possible reasons why he might not turn up. She thought 'he didn't seem that keen on me when we left', 'he didn't ask for my telephone number', 'I bet he was just being polite – he didn't really want to meet me again'.
- ▶ *What did you think was going to happen?* Sara was convincing herself that the boy would not turn up.
- ▶ *How did you think this would end?* Sara thought that she would end up in town all on her own.
- ▶ *What did you think other people might say about what happened?* Sara had made a big fuss about this boy, and her friends would be keen to know what happened. She started to worry about how she would explain it, and she thought that they would all laugh at her.

This negative scene was being acted out in Sara's mind. The more she had these thoughts the worse she felt, and the more convinced she became that this would actually happen.

It is not surprising that Sara felt so uptight and sad! It all started to make sense.



- ▶ We have a constant stream of automatic thoughts running through our heads.
- ▶ Many of these thoughts are about ourselves.
- ▶ Some of these thoughts will be negative and will make us feel unpleasant.
- ▶ Identifying our negative thoughts is the first step towards learning how to feel good.



## Thoughts and feelings

You need to find out more about your automatic negative thoughts and the effect that they have on you.

Fill in the diary over the next week at any time you become aware of a strong negative **'hot'** thought, or if you notice a strong unpleasant feeling. When this happens, write down the following.

- ▶ The date and time.
- ▶ Describe what was happening, who was there, and when and where it happened.
- ▶ What thoughts did you have? What was racing through your mind at the time? Write down exactly what you thought, and don't be embarrassed!
- ▶ How did this make you feel?

Don't worry about spelling or writing. As long as you can remember or read what you have written, they don't matter.





# Thoughts and feelings

<i>Day and time</i>	<i>Situation</i> <i>What, where, when and who?</i>	<i>Thoughts</i> <i>What were your 'hot' thoughts?</i>	<i>Feelings</i> <i>How did you feel?</i>



## My 'hot' thoughts

Over the next week, carefully check your negative 'hot' thoughts and write down the three that you have most often about the following.

### *Yourself*

1

2

3

### *What you do*

1

2

3

### *Your future*

1

2

3

## Nice thoughts about myself



Fill in the thought bubbles by writing or drawing the nice thoughts that you have about yourself.

# Nice thoughts about my future



Fill in the thought bubbles by writing or drawing the nice thoughts that you have about your future.

## Unpleasant thoughts about myself



Fill in the thought bubbles by writing or drawing the unpleasant thoughts that you have about yourself.

# Worrying thoughts about what I do

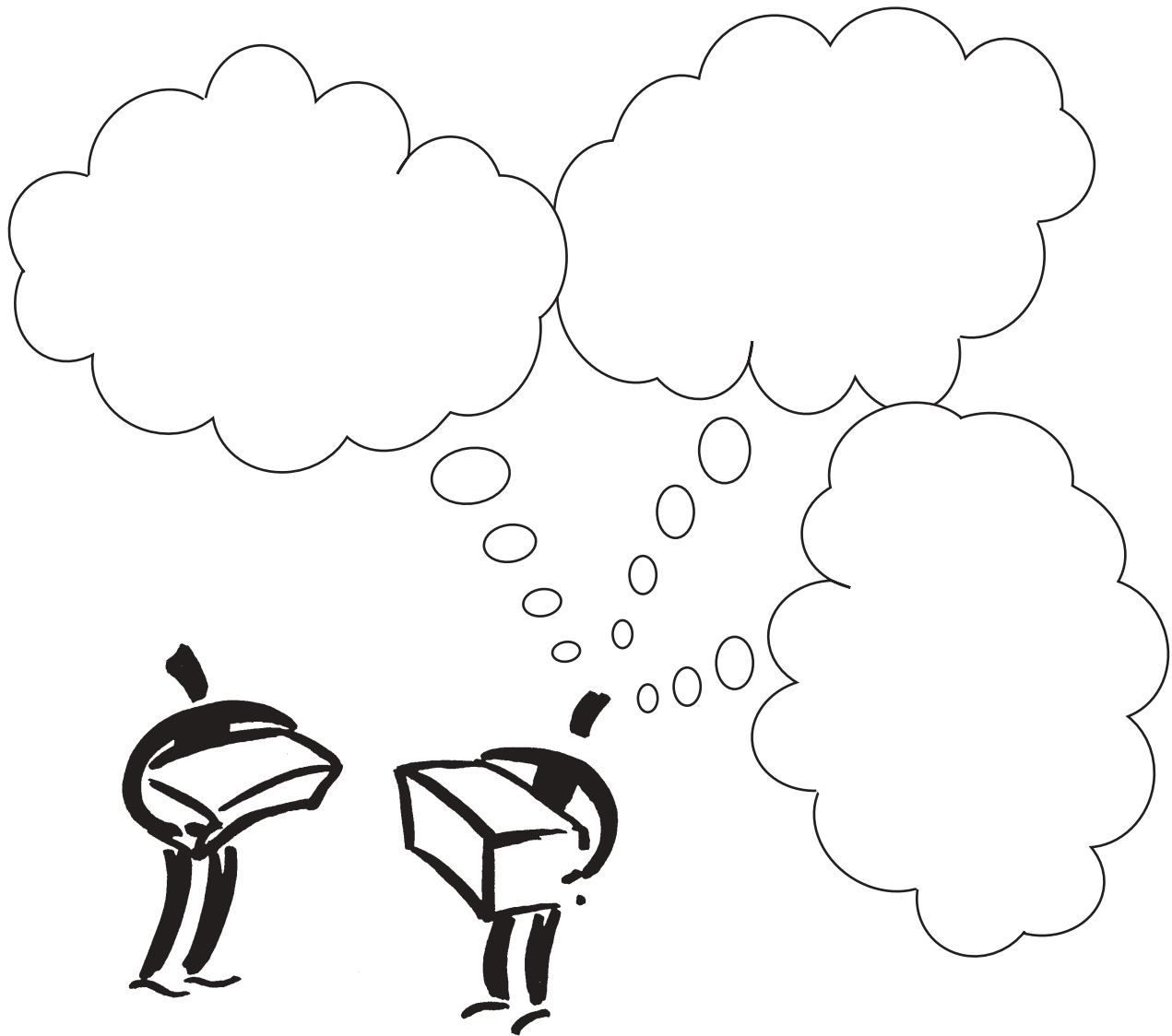


Fill in the thought bubbles by writing or drawing the worrying thoughts that you have about the things you do.



## What are they thinking?

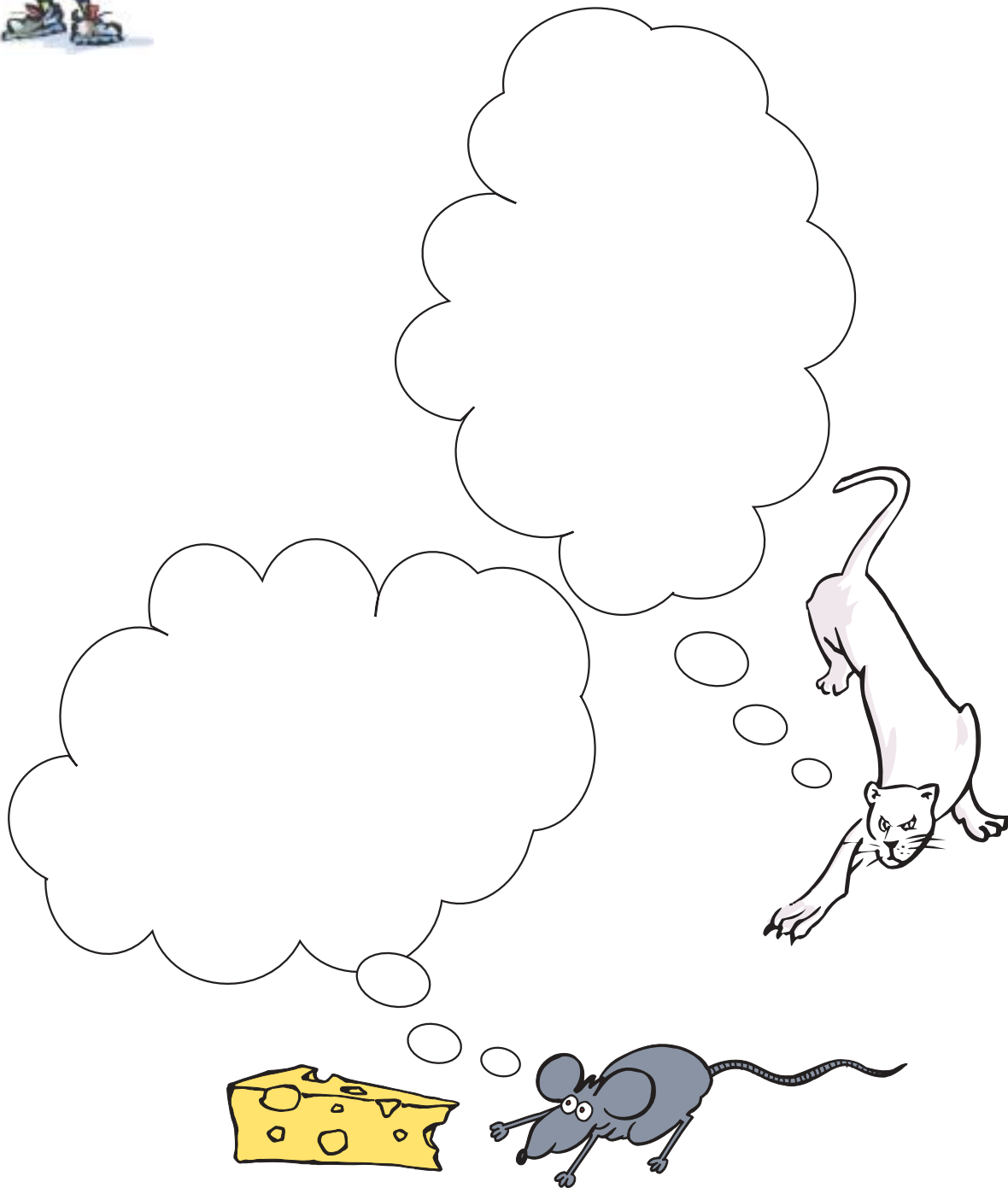
Fill in the thought bubbles by writing or drawing what these people might be thinking.



## What are they thinking?



Fill in the thought bubbles by writing or drawing what the cat and mouse might be thinking.







## What are they thinking?

Fill in the thought bubbles by writing or drawing what sort of things this person might be thinking.



# What are they thinking?



Fill in the thought bubbles by writing or drawing what the cat might be thinking about the dog.

