

CHAPTER NINE



Controlling your thoughts

We spend a great deal of time listening to our thoughts. Some of these thoughts are negative and are about ourselves, what we do and what we expect to happen in the future. As we have already found out, we accept many of these thoughts as true without really questioning them, particularly the negative ones. We then become trapped.



- ▶ The negative thoughts become louder.
- ▶ It becomes harder to turn down the volume and hear other thoughts.
- ▶ The more we listen, the more unpleasant feelings we experience, and the less we end up doing.

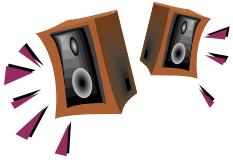
We have started to identify some of our negative thoughts and to learn about the types of thinking errors that we make. Looking for new evidence to test these thoughts is important, and it will help us to check that our thinking is balanced.

For some people, negative thoughts and thinking errors occur so often that there just doesn't seem to be enough time in the day to check and challenge each one. Because they may occur so often, we need to find ways to stop them as soon as we notice them.

The **Thought Tracker** has some ideas to help you to regain control of your thoughts. You may not always find them easy to use, and there will probably be times when you may be aware of your thoughts but feel unable to turn them off. Try not to worry about this. If these ideas work for some of the time they are useful, but remember that the more you practise the better you will become.

Distraction

You may notice that in some situations you often feel uncomfortable or have regular negative thoughts. At these times you may want some short-term relief, and this is where **distraction** techniques may be helpful.



- ▶ **Distraction** helps to take your mind off your negative thoughts.
- ▶ **Distraction** helps you to take control of your thoughts by thinking about something else.
- ▶ Remember that if you continue to listen to your negative thoughts, they will become louder and take over.

The idea of **distraction** is to train yourself to keep your mind busy doing what you want it to do. You teach yourself to focus your thoughts on something else. Rather than listening to worrying or negative thoughts, you learn to drown them out by getting your mind to do what you want it to do.

Distraction can be achieved in different ways.

▶ Describe what you see

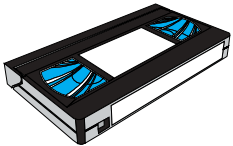
This involves describing to yourself in detail what you see. Try to do this as quickly as you can, and think about colours, shapes, size, smells, textures, etc.

▶ Mary feels frightened

Mary often feels very frightened during her history lesson at school. She can remember a time when the teacher embarrassed her in front of her classmates. Mary still thinks about this incident and it still scares her. When Mary starts to feel frightened she worries more and often ends up thinking about how she is feeling, fearing that she will go red and pass out.

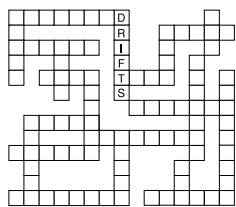
Mary needs to regain control of her thoughts. She needs to think about what is going on around her, rather than concentrating on how she is feeling. The next time she felt frightened, Mary tried describing what she saw. Her description went like this:

“ I'm sitting in a class with about 15 other girls. My teacher, Mrs Evans, is standing at the front. She is wearing a black top, a red crew-neck jumper and a knee-length black skirt. There is writing on the board – today's date, Wednesday 16th, and tonight's homework, which is to copy our rough work into our books. Next to me is Sally. She is wearing a white blouse, cuffs turned back and a black skirt and tights. She has three books on her desk, all closed, and she is fiddling with her pencil.”



By this stage Mary was beginning to feel calmer. She had drowned out her worrying thoughts and had regained control. When she started to feel frightened again, Mary repeated this task until she felt calm and in control.

▶ Thinking puzzles



At other times you may want to occupy your thoughts by setting yourself some form of thinking puzzle. This could be anything, such as:

- ▶ counting backwards from 123 in nines
- ▶ spelling the names of your family backwards
- ▶ naming the records of your favourite group
- ▶ naming all of the players in your favourite sports team.

The puzzle has to be hard enough to challenge you, so don't make it too easy. The idea is that this task takes over and drowns out any unhelpful negative thoughts you might be having.

Absorbing activities

Some people find that they can switch off and become totally absorbed in certain activities.



Crosswords, reading, watching the television/video, playing an instrument, or listening to the radio or to music may be helpful.

The more you concentrate on what you are doing, the more you drown out any negative thoughts.

At those times when you become aware that you are listening to your negative thoughts, try one of the activities which you find helpful. For example:

- ▶ instead of lying in bed listening to your negative thoughts, put on your personal stereo and listen to some music
- ▶ Instead of worrying whether your friend will call, pick up a book and start to read it, or do a puzzle.

The more you practise the easier you will find it to block out your negative thoughts.

Coping self-talk

Negative thoughts often increase anxious or unhappy feelings. Instead of listening to your negative thoughts, try changing them by using **coping self-talk**. Coping self-talk is useful because:

- ▶ it can help you to feel more relaxed
- ▶ it can make you feel more confident
- ▶ it encourages you to try rather than to give up or avoid doing things.

Coping self-talk is useful if you are going to do something that really worries you. At these difficult times, instead of listening to your doubts and worries, plan to keep repeating encouraging and positive coping messages to yourself.

Positive self-talk

We are not always very good at praising ourselves for being successful. **Positive self-talk** is a way of helping us to take more notice of our achievements.

- ▶ Instead of thinking ‘I’ve only answered one question – I’ll never be able to finish all ten’, use **positive self-talk** such as ‘that’s the first question finished – now for the next one’.
- ▶ Instead of thinking ‘no one talks to me when we go out’, use **positive self-talk** such as ‘that was the first time Rory has ever said anything to me’.

Positive self-talk helps you to recognize that although things may not be perfect, they may be better than you think!

▶ Amy doesn’t like going out

Amy becomes very anxious and fearful whenever she goes out of her house. She has lots of negative thoughts about what will happen, and these make her feel very anxious.

Amy decided to try coping and positive self-talk when she next went out. Instead of listening to her negative doubts and worries, she decided to think differently.

Before she went out she used her **copied self-talk**. Amy said to herself 'I'm going to do this today', 'It will be all right', 'I have been out before and everything was OK', 'I'm feeling relaxed, I'm in charge and I want to go out'.

As Amy walked down the road, she used her **positive self-talk**, with comments such as 'That's good, I'm halfway there', 'I knew I could do it', 'It's going OK' and 'I know I'm going to do it'. Amy kept repeating these thoughts to herself until she returned home.

After Amy arrived home she remembered to congratulate herself and thought 'Well done', 'That wasn't so bad after all'. She then treated herself to a long, relaxing bubble bath.

Thought stopping

Sometimes you will find that you are only able to stop your thoughts for a short time before they break through again. Another method you could use to try to control them is **thought stopping**. As soon as you become aware of the thought, follow the steps below.



- ▶ Immediately and loudly say **STOP**.
- ▶ Some people find it useful to emphasize this by banging the table or holding a chair or table tightly.
- ▶ Straight away think of your challenge to this negative thought and repeat it loudly to yourself.

▶ Omar goes for an interview

Omar was going for a job interview. All the time he was waiting to be interviewed negative thoughts were racing through his head:

'You're not going to get this job', 'I bet I'll go red and dry up when they ask me questions', 'I look silly in this suit'.

Omar had had enough. He was getting more and more anxious. He decided to use thought stopping. He said clearly and loudly to himself '**STOP**'.

As soon as he said this he challenged his negative thoughts and started to use his coping self-talk: 'This may not be easy, but I want this job and I'm going to try. It doesn't matter if I do go red. I'll answer their questions as well as I can'.

Omar repeated this to himself a few times and started to calm down.

With **thought stopping** you are changing the tape inside your head. Instead of listening to the constant negative tape, **thought stopping** helps you to turn it off and replace it with something more balanced.

Turn the volume down

Another way of doing this is to try to imagine the tape recorder in your head that is playing the negative tape. Imagine what the tape recorder looks like and describe it to yourself in as much detail as possible.

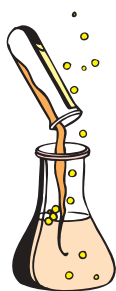


- ▶ What does it look like?
- ▶ What size and colour is it?
- ▶ Where are the controls?
- ▶ How do you turn it on and off?
- ▶ How do you alter the volume?

The more you concentrate on your tape, the clearer your picture will become. Once you have a good picture in your head, imagine yourself changing the settings.

- ▶ As you turn the volume up, notice how the sound becomes louder.
- ▶ As you turn the volume down, notice how the sound becomes quieter.
- ▶ As you turn the off switch, notice how silent it becomes.
- ▶ As you turn the tape on, notice how you start to hear the sound again.

Practise changing the controls. The more you practise the easier it will become. When you start to notice that you are listening to your negative thoughts, imagine the picture of your tape recorder and turn the volume down or turn the tape off altogether.



Test them

Sometimes it is useful to test your thoughts and beliefs by setting up experiments to find out whether what you expect actually happens. This is particularly useful if you often make the mind-reader and fortune-teller thinking errors, which predict that things will not work.

Julie's schoolwork

Julie did not believe that she was good at any of her school subjects. She thought that she always got her work wrong. To test this belief, Julie wrote down the results of her next 10 homework assignments.

Core belief: I'm not clever

Automatic thoughts: I always get my homework wrong. I can't do this

Test: The marks I get for my next 10 homework assignments

What I expect to happen (my prediction): To get poor marks (less than 6/10) for all of my homework assignments

- 1. English 3/10. You need to write more, Julie, and make sure that you answer the question.*
- 2. Maths 7/10. Well done, Julie. Good work.*
- 3. Maths 7/10. Keep it up, Julie.*
- 4. English 4/10. Answer the questions please, Julie.*
- 5. Geography 6/10. Nice map.*
- 6. Art 9/10. Excellent work.*
- 7. English 2/10. Can you please see me, Julie. This is not good enough.*
- 8. History 5/10. Not your best work.*
- 9. Maths 8/10. Good work.*
- 10. English 4/10. Check your spelling and please write more neatly.*

This test showed that Julie was having a problem with her English. As Julie had thought, she was getting poor marks and she wasn't answering the questions. Her history teacher also thought that she could do better, **but** the marks that Julie obtained for her other five homework assignments in maths, art and geography were good. It was possible to find a more balanced way of thinking about her schoolwork, after all.

Throw them away

Thoughts race around inside our heads.

- ▶ No one hears them.
- ▶ No one questions them.

Sometimes it is useful to empty our heads and clear our thoughts away.



At the end of the day, write down your negative thoughts on a piece of paper. If you want, you can type them on your computer and print them out.

Think of them all and write them down.

Once you have finished, scrunch up your paper tightly and throw the thoughts in the wastepaper bin!



- ▶ There are different ways in which you can take control of and challenge your thoughts.
- ▶ You will probably need to use a range of methods.
- ▶ The method that you choose will not always be successful.
- ▶ The more you practise the easier it will become, so stick with it.



Test your thoughts and beliefs

- 1 What is the negative belief/thought that you hear most often?
- 2 Use the Thought Thermometer on page 87 to rate how strongly you believe this thought.
- 3 What experiment could you set up to test whether this is true?
- 4 When will you carry out your test?
- 5 If your belief/thought was true, what do you predict would happen?
- 6 What did happen?
- 7 Use the Thought Thermometer to rate how strongly you now believe this thought.



The thought challenger



With the help of the Thought Tracker, identify the unhelpful or negative thoughts that you hear most often.



My most common negative thought is . . .

Look at **all** the evidence. What would be a more balanced thought?



A more balanced thought is . . .

Whenever you notice this negative thought:

- 1 say **STOP** to yourself
- 2 repeat your balanced thought two or three times – this will help to turn down the volume of the negative thought.



- ▶ It is useful to practise balanced thinking. As you get up each morning, repeat your balanced thought to yourself two or three times.
- ▶ Don't just listen to your negative thoughts. Challenge them and turn down the volume.

THINK GOOD – FEEL GOOD



Looking for the positive



We always seem to notice the things that aren't quite right, but we are not very good at noticing the positive or good things that happen.

Each night before you go to bed, think of three things that have happened that have made you feel good. These could be anything, such as:

- ▶ nice thoughts about yourself
- ▶ positive thoughts about what you have done or achieved
- ▶ activities that have made you feel good
- ▶ things that others have said which made you feel good.

Each day write down three things, either in a private diary or on a large sheet of paper on your bedroom wall.

If you can't think of three good things, then ask someone to help you.



- ▶ Watching the list grow will help you to realize that positive things do happen to you.



Positive self-talk



We are not very good at recognizing our achievements. Often we think about the things that have gone wrong or which aren't quite right. When this happens it is useful to challenge our negative thoughts with positive self-talk.

Write down some of your negative thoughts at the end of each day.



My negative thoughts were:

Check your thoughts and see if you have missed anything positive.



The positive things I missed were:



What would be your positive self-talk?



- ▶ You may find this difficult at first, but don't worry. The more you practise the easier it will become.
- ▶ The next time you hear your negative thoughts, turn them off, look for success and use positive self-talk.

THINK GOOD – FEEL GOOD



Coping self-talk



Some of our thoughts are not helpful. In fact, they make us feel more anxious or worried. These thoughts make us think that things will go wrong and make us expect that bad things will happen. Learning to identify and replace these thoughts with coping self-talk will help you to feel better.

With the help of the Thought Tracker, think about a situation or event that makes you feel anxious or unpleasant. When you are in this situation, write down or draw a picture of the thoughts that race through your mind. Once you have done this, think about how you can challenge these thoughts with coping self-talk.



The situation or event that makes me feel anxious or worried is:



The thoughts that make me feel anxious are:



My coping self-talk is:



The next time you are in that situation, use coping self-talk to help you to feel better.



The 'worry safe'



Sometimes it is difficult to stop worrying and turn off the thoughts that are going around in our heads.

When this happens, it may be useful to draw these thoughts or write them down on paper and lock them away!



- ▶ Find a box and make your own worry safe. Paint and colour it as you like and choose a place to keep it.
- ▶ When you find that you can't stop your worries, find some paper and draw them or write them down.
- ▶ Once you have finished, lock them away in your safe.
- ▶ At the end of the week, unlock your safe and talk about your worries with Mum, Dad or someone you trust.



- ▶ Once your worries are in the safe they will find it harder to trouble you.

THINK GOOD – FEEL GOOD



Turn the tape off

Sometimes you may hear the same worries or negative thoughts over and over again. It is like listening to a tape that is being played inside your head.



- ▶ The tape goes round and round.
- ▶ The same thoughts are heard over and over again.
- ▶ The tape never gets changed.
- ▶ The volume is never turned down.

At these times it is useful to learn how to turn the tape off.

Step 1: Imagine your tape player

- Imagine a picture of a tape player going round and round inside your head.
- You may find that looking at a real tape player can help you to get a good picture.
- Really look at the tape player and see how you can turn it on and off, where you put the tape, and how you can change the volume.

Step 2: Imagine stopping the tape

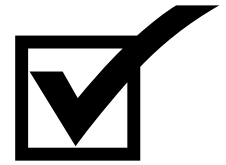
- Think of this picture and imagine yourself putting a tape in the player.
- As you switch it on, the tape starts and you hear your worries and negative thoughts.
- Now imagine turning the tape player off. Really concentrate on the 'off' switch, and as you touch the button notice how the thoughts stop.
- Practise turning the tape player on and off, and notice how the 'off' button stops your negative thoughts.



Remember that the more you practise the easier it will become.



Practise being successful



When faced with new or difficult challenges, we often think that we shall not be successful. We are very good at predicting failure and thinking that things will go wrong.

Thinking like this will make us feel anxious and reluctant to try anything new or challenging.



A useful way forward is to imagine a picture of your challenge and to talk yourself through what will happen, but this time change the ending so that you are successful.

Step 1: Imagine your challenge

Make your picture as real as possible and describe your challenge in plenty of detail. Think about:

- who will be there
- the time of day
- what you are wearing
- the colours, smells and sounds.

Step 2: Talk yourself through your challenge

Now think about what will happen. Talk yourself through your challenge.

- What will you do?
- What will you say?
- What will the other people do?
- What will they say?
- What will happen?



Practising a few times will help you to prepare yourself, and may help you to recognize that although it might be difficult, you can start to imagine what it is like to be successful.

THINK GOOD – FEEL GOOD



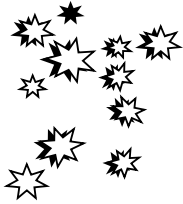
Thought stopping

Sometimes the same unhelpful thoughts go round and round in our heads. The more we hear them:

- ▶ the more we believe them
- ▶ the more we look for evidence that supports them.

When we check them out we often find that we are only seeing part of the picture – usually the negative part. It is important to try to stop these thoughts.

A useful way of doing this is to wear an elastic band on your wrist.



When you notice that you are listening to the same unhelpful thoughts, snap the elastic band.



The elastic band will hurt a little, but this will probably stop these thoughts!