

Struggling to manage racing or negative thoughts? Try using a thought journal!

The objective of this exercise is to be able to break down patterns of thinking that are not helpful to us. When we are stuck in negative thinking it may seem as though our mind becomes a magnet for distressing thoughts. As a result we tend to dwell on unproductive ideas rather than move ourselves towards more productive ideas and feelings. This can often lead to cycles of anxiety, depression and obsessive thinking that may be painful and difficult to break.

Common examples of negative thinking that you may recognize are:

Filtering – Focusing on the negative and ignoring the positive.

Polarized thinking – There are no shades of grey. Everything is either black or white.

Overgeneralization – Making sweeping statements without looking at the evidence.

Mind Reading – Assuming you know what other think without them telling you.

Catastrophizing – Assuming the worst will happen.

Magnifying – Making problems larger than they are.

Personalization – Believing everything is about you and that others have the same feelings.

Shoulds – Making random rules about things you cannot control.

Using a thought journal (provided below) can be helpful in identifying and breaking some of these patterns and is easy to use. Follow these easy steps:

- 1) In column 1 identify the situation that is causing you distress. Be sure to describe the event in as much detail as possible including *when* it happened, *who* was there, *what* was said/done, *where* the event took place
- 2) In column 2 write down all of the emotions you experienced during the situation listed in column 1. Be such to be as detailed as possible with your emotions. Some emotions such as “anger” may be hiding “sadness”, “hurt”, “disappointment”, etc. Rate each emotion on a scale of 0 not bad at all to 100 the worst imaginable.

- 3) In column 3 write down the “automatic thought” that occurs to you, in other words the very first thought that came to mind.
- 4) In column 4 write down the “evidence supporting” the automatic thought, in other words the reason you believe the automatic thought in column 3 is TRUE.
- 5) In column 5 write down the “evidence against” the automatic thought, in other words the reason you believe the automatic thought in column 3 is FALSE.
- 6) In column 6 write down a “positive coping thought” designed to help you counteract the automatic thought. This can be something you say to yourself or can be an action you plan to take.
- 7) In column 7 write down the same emotions (or if they have changed slightly write those down as well) as in column 2. Now give them a number as in column 2 according to how strong they feel to you now with 0 being not strong at all with 10 being the worst imaginable. An example for the exercise is provided in the attached chart.

Happy positive thinking!

THOUGHT JOURNAL

Situation	Emotion	Automatic Thought	Evidence Supporting	Evidence Against	Positive Coping Thought	Emotion
<i>Describe event that led to unpleasant emotion</i>	<i>Specify emotion e.g. sad, angry and rate from 0 (none) to 100 (worst)</i>	<i>Write down the immediate thought that occurred with the emotion</i>	<i>What is the evidence that this thought is true?</i>	<i>What is the evidence that this thought is false?</i>	<i>What can I say to myself instead of the automatic thought?</i>	<i>What emotion are you feeling now? Rate the intensity of the emotion from 0 (none) to 100 (worst)</i>
E.g. Spouse left home without saying goodbye this morning	Angry 50% Hurt 50%	He/she is ignoring me and does not care about me.	He/she did not say goodbye to me yesterday either.	He/she usually does say goodbye, but I know that this is a rough week and he/she has a lot on his/her mind.	I will make sure I give him/her a hug/kiss goodbye tomorrow.	Angry 10% Hurt 20%