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Cognitive Restructuring

Our thoughts can have a huge impact on our health. Not only can they affect our mood, which makes sense, but they can actually change our physiology. One way to think about it, is that every thought has a neurochemical equivalent – meaning that each thought actually has a physical manifestation in our body! The good news is, you can choose what type of thoughts you have and therefore whether you want those thoughts to have a positive or a negative impact. But first, let's understand why we think the way we do.

Reasons for our thought patterns

There are 2 main reasons that a person can have the thought patterns that they do.

1. **Biochemistry and Temperament** – This is the part of your personality that is due to genetics or epigenetics and also the environment of your early childhood. Perhaps you were born being a little more pessimistic than others or maybe you were an especially happy child. Childhood traumas can also have an impact here.
2. **Thinking Habits** – This is the part of our thought patterns that is due to learned behavior, much of which likely began in childhood. For example, if one of your parents was very anxious and had a tendency to worry, you may very well learn that same behavior. Luckily, we can change negative thinking patterns.

Recognizing our thought patterns

Cognitive distortions lie at the heart of the process of cognitive restructuring. These thoughts don't generally reflect reality and are not conducive to healing or growth. Instead, they contribute to our feelings of depression, anxiety, loneliness, stress, anger, distrust, helplessness and fear. So, the first step in cognitive restructuring is being able to identify these distortions. There are 10 main types of cognitive distortions.

1. **All or nothing thinking** – This distortion only lets us see things in black and white. "If I don't do something perfectly, I'm a failure."
2. **Overgeneralization** – This occurs when a single negative event is seen as a never ending pattern of defeat. Use words such as "never" and "always" contribute to this distortion.
3. **Mental filter** – By picking out a single negative event and dwelling on it you are using this cognitive distortion.
4. **Disqualifying the positive** – This is done when you reject anything positive that happens.

5. **Magnification or minimization** – Exaggerating the importance of some things (such as negative qualities) and minimizing others (such as positive or desirable qualities) is an example of this.
6. **Jumping to conclusions** – This occurs when we make negative assumptions or interpretations that aren't actually supported by the facts. Examples include mind reading (assuming someone else is acting negatively to you without asking) and fortune telling (convincing yourself that things will turn out badly).
7. **Emotional reasoning** – Using your emotions as facts is emotional reasoning. For example, "I'm scared of flying, therefore it must be unsafe."
8. **"Should" statements** – Using these on yourself produces guilt, while directing them towards others can make you angry.
9. **Labeling and mislabeling** – This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Saying, "I'm a loser," instead of, "I made a mistake," is an example of this.
10. **Personalization and blame** – This occurs when you hold yourself or another personally responsible for an event that isn't under your control. For example, "my son got a bad report card, so I must be a bad parent," is an example of personalization, while, "My marriage is bad because my spouse is a jerk," is an example of blame.

Canceling negative thoughts

Can you identify any of these types of cognitive distortions in your own thought patterns? It may take a little practice but once you can recognize when you're engaging in negative thinking, you can begin to change those patterns.

1. **Become aware when you are thinking negatively**
2. **Say out loud, "CANCEL! CANCEL!"**
3. **Identify the type of distortion using the above list**
4. **Replace each distortion with a more rational and realistic thought**
5. **Note how you feel**

Disempowering core beliefs

Behind the negative thoughts often lie disempowering core beliefs. Many of these negative beliefs were formed early in childhood. Criticism from a parent may lead to the belief that "I'm unlovable" and "If I don't achieve, I'm worthless." Later on in life, events may trigger these core beliefs and lead to cognitive distortions such as, "Nobody loves me" (overgeneralization). The first step in releasing negative beliefs is becoming aware of them. If your beliefs arose from early childhood trauma or abuse, it may be necessary to grieve the loss in therapy or some other healing work. Look over the list below and see if you can identify any of your own disempowering core beliefs.

I don't deserve love	I can't do it	I can't be myself	If I love I'll be hurt
I don't deserve love	I'm dumb	It's not okay to show my feelings	I can't risk being in a relationship
I must earn love	I'm not as smart as others	The world is unsafe	I can't make it without you
I'm not lovable	I'm clumsy	The world is unhappy	My partner can't make it without me
I'm incompetent	I'm ugly	Money doesn't grow on trees	Marriage is a trap
I'm not important	I fail no matter how hard I try	Nice guys finish last	I must control my partner
I'm not creative	I don't deserve to succeed	Life's a bitch and then you die	Relationships can't last
I must please others	I don't deserve pleasure	Life is only about suffering	Divorce is a sin
I don't fit in	It's not okay to feel good	The world is against me	The one I love will abandon me
I'm not capable	I can't have what I want	I can't find love	I'm not meant to be in a relationship
My opinions don't count	I don't deserve happiness	I'll never find the right person	People I depend on will let me down
I'm a bad person	I'm a loser	Men/women can't be trusted	