

Evaluating Unhelpful Thoughts

Have you ever assumed the worst would happen or made negative predictions about how a situation would turn out?

Or did you find yourself second-guessing what others think of you? These kinds of thoughts are automatic and happen at the speed of light that you may not even realize that you have them - or question them!



Having unhelpful thoughts is a normal part of growth. However, when it's persistent or overwhelming, it can negatively impact your behaviour, emotions and physical well-being. These kinds of unhelpful thoughts can make you feel inadequate, anxious, embarrassed, or angry, among other negative emotions.

These thoughts might feel like the truth and are often the consequence of thought patterns passed down to us or trauma.

These thoughts may have remained unchallenged for years. How you view your experiences is often based on emotions and assumptions, it's important to remember this is not always based on facts.

Becoming aware of unhelpful thinking helps us to then 'fact check' them to assess the truth of those thoughts and can give us relief when things feel difficult.

This can help you more easily manage difficult situations. This exercise will help you identify unhelpful thoughts and consider alternatives so that you can uncover and explore new ways of thinking about your experiences and problematic situations.



Step 1: Identifying unhelpful thoughts

To begin this exercise, you will think about an unhelpful thought you frequently have or have had in the past and describe the situation in which the unhelpful thought occurred.

Some examples include:

- "I'm a failure"
- "They're only being nice to me because they have to be"
- "No one likes me"
- "People like me don't or can't do things like that"
- "I will always need to work so hard"
- "I can't do this"

Now, think of a time when you experienced these kinds of unhelpful thoughts. Describe the specific situation and what thought(s) were present at the time.

How did these thoughts make you feel?

Why was this line of thinking not helpful in this situation?

Step 2: Identifying more helpful thoughts

This step is about bringing awareness to a new helpful thought. Think of a helpful thought as sturdy, super comfortable all encompassing chair to sit in as opposed to a wobbly, uncomfortable one.

Helpful thinking means taking a perspective that results feelings that help you to better deal with a challenging situation. It does not bypass the automatic negative thought, it is simply a way to respond to those thoughts in the moments when you feel you can. The brain is much like a muscle and at first thinking in this way may feel uncomfortable and triggering and with patience and practice it can get easier.

For instance, imagine you experience high-stress levels before delivering a presentation.

Thinking,

“Oh my goodness, I’m losing it and will make a fool of myself”

This will be likely to generate more negative stressful feelings. It will probably make it more difficult for you to deal with the challenging situation.

A more helpful alternative thought would be:

“It’s normal and ok to be stressed. All I can do is give it my best.”

These thoughts will likely result in more positive feelings of reassurance that are more helpful for dealing with stressful situations.



What is a more helpful thought in the situation you thought about? Alternatively you can think about the most optimistic and resilient person you know, what would they think in this situation?

In what ways are these thoughts more helpful in this situation? What insights have you gained from this exercise?

This tool was inspired by Elaine Houston and we invite you close this activity with a meditation click below:

