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Developing Coping Skills with Cognitive Therapy

Cognitive therapy is a form of psychotherapy developed from the finding that psychological disturbances frequently involve errors in thinking. These errors in thinking lead to problems with our feelings, poor self-esteem, and impairments in our relationships and communications.

Ten types of cognitive distortions that get us into trouble:

1. All-or-Nothing Thinking: You look at things in absolute, black-and-white categories.
2. Over Generalization: You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. Mental Filter: You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives.
4. Discounting the Positives: You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities "don't count".
5. Jumping to Conclusions: (A) Mind reading – you assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there's no definitive evidence for this. (B) Fortune telling – you arbitrarily predict that things will turn out badly.
6. Magnification or Minimization: You blow things way out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately.
7. Emotional Reasoning: You reason from how you feel. For example, you might think, "I feel like an idiot, so I really must be one" or "I don't feel like doing this so I'll put it off."
8. "Should" Statements: You criticize yourself or other people with "should" or "shouldn't." Similar offenders include "musts", "ought", and "have to's."
9. Labeling: You identify with your shortcomings. Instead of saying "I made a mistake," you tell yourself "I'm a jerk" or "a fool" or "a loser."
10. Personalization and Blame: You blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook that your own attitudes and behavior might contribute to a problem.

Ten ways to UNTWIST your thinking:

1. Identify the Distortion: Write down your negative thoughts so you can see which of the ten cognitive distortions you're involved in. This will make it easier to think about the problem in a more positive and realistic way.
2. Examine the Evidence: Instead of assuming that your negative thought is true, examine the actual evidence for it. For example, if you feel that you never do anything right, you could list several things that you have done successfully.
3. The Double-Standard Method: Instead of putting yourself down in a harsh, condemning way, talk to yourself in the same compassionate way you would talk to a friend with a similar problem.
4. The Experimental Technique: Do an experiment to test the validity of your negative thought. For example, if during an episode of panic, you become terrified that you're about to die of a heart attack, you can jog or run up and down several flights of stairs. This will prove that your heart is healthy and strong.
5. Thinking in Shades of Gray: Although this method might sound drab, the effects can be illuminating. Instead of thinking about your problems in all-or-nothing extremes, evaluate things on a scale of 0 to 100. When things don't work out as well as you hoped, think about the experience as a partial success rather than a complete failure. See what you can learn from the situation.

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6. The Survey Method: Ask people questions to find out if your thoughts and attitudes are realistic. For example, if you believe that public-speaking anxiety is abnormal and shameful, ask several people if they ever felt nervous before they gave a talk.
7. Define Terms: When you label yourself “inferior” or “a fool” or “a loser,” ask yourself “what is the true definition of a fool?” You will feel better when you see that there is no definitive answer to that.
8. The Semantic Method: Simply substitute language that is less colorful and emotionally loaded. This method is good for “should” statements. Instead of telling yourself “I shouldn’t have made that mistake,” you can say “It would have been better if I hadn’t made that mistake.”
9. Reattribution: Instead of automatically assuming that you are “bad” and blaming yourself entirely for a problem, think about the many factors that may have contributed to it. Focus on solving the problem instead of using up all your energy blaming yourself and feeling guilty.
10. Cost-Benefit Analysis: List the advantages and disadvantages of a feeling (such as anger when your plane is late), a negative thought (such as “no matter how much I try, I always screw up”), or behavior patterns (such as over-eating or lying in bed when you are depressed). You can also use Cost-Benefit Analysis to modify a self-defeating belief such as “I must always be perfect.”

In order to benefit from these principles, you will need to identify your irrational thoughts in a journal. Use the following format:

1. Describe the upsetting event.
2. Record your negative feelings (sad, anxious, angry, guilty, lonely, hopeless, frustrated, etc.)
3. Write down your negative thoughts.
4. Identify the distortion.
5. Substitute more realistic thoughts.
6. Describe how you now feel.

Please practice these techniques; they are an important part of improving your coping skills.

Reference: *The Feeling Good Handbook*, by David D. Burns, M.D.

Example of thoughts that cause problems:

People must love me or I will be miserable. Making mistakes is terrible. People should be condemned for their wrong doing. I can't stand the way people act. It is terrible when things go wrong. My emotions can't be controlled. I should be terribly worried about threatening situations. Self-discipline is too hard to achieve. I MUST depend on others. I MUST not depend on others. My childhood must always affect me. Every problem has a perfect solution. I should be better than others. If others criticize me, I must have done something wrong. I can't change what I think. I should help everyone who needs it. I must never show any weakness. Healthy people don't get upset. There is one true love. I should never hurt anyone. There is a magic cure for my problems. It's others' responsibility to solve my problems. Strong people don't ask for help. I can do things only when I'm in the mood. Possible is the same as probable. I am inferior. I am always in the spotlight. People ought to do what I wish. Giving up is always the best policy. I need to be sure to decide. One must always be sure to decide. One must always be sure to decide. Change is unnatural. Knowing how my problems started when I was young is essential. Everybody should trust me. I should be happy all the time. There is a secret, terrible part of me that controls me. Working on my problems could hurt me. The world ought to be fair. I am not responsible for my behavior. It is always better not to be genuine. I have no problems. Anxiety is always dangerous. You can't tell me anything about me that I don't know. People shouldn't act the way they do. I should be able to control my kid's or spouse's behavior. Will power alone can solve all my problems.