

Stinkin' Thinkin'

Thoughts can trigger anxiety. Anxiety is most easily understood as 'fear of fear'. It is an exaggerated fear response. Anxiety is fear of things that are natural and unavoidable; however, these fears become so exaggerated, that the fear itself becomes disproportionate, heightened and irrational.

- Fear of insignificance
- Fear of death
- Fear of separation
- Fear of loss of autonomy
- Fear of mutilation

Imagine a young boy who has a headache or a young girl who has an acute pain in her side. They both become anxious, afraid, and concerned they might have cancer.

Ask yourself these questions:

- What triggers the anxiety in either story?
- What might be reasons that someone could have a headache or side pain?
- What might be other reasons?
- How would someone else react if they were not anxious?
- Would they presume it was because of....?

How you interpret things makes a difference in how you react to those things. If you believe something is dangerous, you will react fearfully.

The problem with the fear Response in these stories is there is nothing to fight. There might be flight in the case of avoidance, or there is a chance for freeze. In these cases, they become paralyzed by their anxiety.

Over time, these **thoughts can become automatic** and lead to increased anxiety. High levels of anxiety disrupt your brain's ability to focus and think logically about things. Remember our 3 brains? Automatic thoughts are triggered by our lizard brain ... and result in our thinking brain going off line, which means our PFC & CEN going offline.

What are automatic thoughts?

They are **automatic** – often so quick we don't notice them

They are **inaccurate** reflections on the actual situation

There are **3 ways of dealing** with automatic thoughts

1. Plow through them
2. Move closer and Identify automatic thoughts
3. Distance from automatic thoughts
4. Oops... a fourth! That's what we're doing

We will look at each method separately.

1. **Plow through them**

In the strictest of sense of the word this is old school behaviour therapy. Turn off your thoughts and *Just Do it...* and change comes as a result of the consequences - after the fact!

Exposure hierarchies use this approach, gradually building up to more severe stressors with the aim of becoming more able to cope with stress. As your brain is flooded with fear it will gradually become desensitized and anxiety levels will begin to fall.

2. **Moving into automatic thoughts**

The rationale behind this approach to thoughts is to ID, recognize patterns/core themes and challenge them. The point is to target thoughts that drive anxiety.

The goal is to help you learn to see the things and the situations that provoke your fears in an unbiased way. In this way you look at your thoughts and learning way to analyze, and evaluate your own thoughts.

Paying attention to your own thoughts and interpretations of events helps you to learn to identify which ones may be more negative, incorrect or irrational interpretations of the situation you are in.

Cognitive restructuring is:

- Set of skills designed to help identify and re-evaluate the ways of thinking and interpreting situations that are contributing to the fears
- Emphasizes cognition relating to the specific present fears
- The emphasize will shift towards a more general view of self/world/future

This is typically done by starting with you describing a situation in which you were particularly anxious – this helps to elicit automatic thoughts, and then you write down.

There are several ways to write them down. One is used in many cognitive therapies and is called the **DOWNWARD ARROW**.



Once identified, the next step is to change them.

Logically the next step is challenging the negative or incorrect assumptions in these thoughts.

It is NOT:

- Simply replacing negative thoughts with positive ones
- Changing thoughts of danger into thoughts of safety

This is followed then by a critical examination of the thoughts themselves using a series of questions. In this way you are trying to 'on-board' your prefrontal cortex!

Once the ability to catch and change thoughts is in place, the next step is to practice. This is done by graded exposure.

Exposure is a powerful technique because it works on all 3 components of anxiety:

1. Behavioural: do things you avoid (or stop using copers)
2. Cognitive: test whether what you believe/fear will really happen
3. Emotional: it causes a flood of fear that eventually desensitized you to it!

3. Distancing yourself from your automatic thoughts

Distancing yourself is another way of dealing with unhelpful thoughts. This is the technique that is used when practicing mindfulness.

[Click here](#) for more information on mindful practices.

4. Become more Resilient

This approach involves whole brain thinking.

Resilient individuals demonstrate greater psychological flexibility in dealing with stress. Instead of becoming anxious, they can leverage the mind's reflective capacity. They demonstrate mental agility and strength.

Resilience training builds mental fitness. As a result, instead of focusing only on thoughts and behaviours, resilience training includes the emotional regions of the brain, unleashing and harnessing the power of emotion. Emotion is fuel, and when used appropriately, emotion fuels new learning and growth.