

A CLIENT'S GUIDE TO USING THOUGHT RECORDS

Introduction

When you are undertaking cognitive therapy or cognitive behaviour therapy as a client, you may well be asked to keep thought records for a while. The aim of this activity is to help you to step back from some of your thoughts and reflect on them. When we are troubled, our thoughts can easily get negative and at times negative thoughts can automatically take over and dominate our feelings – about ourselves and about life. Sometimes it is possible to distract ourselves from such thoughts, sometimes we can learn to let them flow through our minds ('like a leaf floating on a stream'), and at other times it can help to examine them more closely by doing a Thought Record. It is basically good to have plenty of strategies for dealing with negative thoughts and feelings when they come up. You can keep trying different things until you come up with the best way for you. Thought records are one such strategy. Sometimes they will help you feel much better quite quickly. At other times, it may take longer for the 'feel-good factor' to kick in. Persistence is essential – partly because you will get much better at doing them over time. Your therapist should do them with you for a while before asking you to do some as home practice activities. Below are a few preliminary hints on how to get the most out of doing a thought record. (NB. There are several different types of thought record. We use the 7 Column Thought Record devised by Christine Padesky (in her self-help book, *Mind Over Mood*¹ (New York: Guilford Press), which it may be useful to buy).

Column 1: Situation. Try to identify the exact moment when the bad feelings started to 'kick in'. This might be when the 'event' happened – when a friend failed to show up for a drink or when you got 'bad news' by letter. Equally, the moment might have been when nothing seemed to be happening but when you had a thought in your head. This might be particularly true if you have been feeling depressed and 'sitting round thinking'.

Column 2: Moods. Try to express your feelings in 'primary colours' – angry, sad, afraid, depressed, anxious, empty, and so on, rather than in long sentences such as 'I felt that Rosalind didn't really love me and that I would end up being on my own for ever.' The problem with sentences like this is that they are in fact a mixture of thoughts and feelings. Thought records work most effectively when we will be able to see thoughts separated from feelings, as we can then see how thoughts influence feelings. In this example, if we removed 'I felt that...', the rest of the sentence would go in the next column for Automatic Thoughts. Don't forget to rate each mood out of 100.

¹ ISBN: 0-89862-128-3

Column 3: Automatic Thoughts (Images). We all have thousands of automatic thoughts every day but not all of them are linked to our negative feelings. The aim of the Thought Record is to identify those thoughts (the ‘hot thoughts’) most closely linked to these bad feelings. We have this aim so that we can learn to challenge these thoughts and so to feel better. It is often helpful to think about what these negative thoughts *mean*. For example, someone not liking or loving us might mean (in that moment!) that we are unlovable. Not getting a job might mean (in that moment) that we are ‘failures’ or ‘useless’. Sometimes these thoughts are expressed in images – one client (who was depressed following redundancy) found that when she considered applying for a job, she imagined being humiliated by the interviewers at the job interview. (She eventually made a good recovery and now has a good job.)

Columns 4 and 5: The Evidence columns. As we suggested earlier, negative thoughts often take over and so may lead us to neglect factors that do not fit with negative thoughts and predictions. Sometimes the negative mind can operate a kind of ‘security gate’ excluding the more friendly facts. In these two columns try to examine all the factors – good and bad – in the round. If the situation isn’t quite as bad as one imagined, then this can free up coping and problem solving skills and, if it is, then it can help to ‘face the worst’ and plan a way out.

Column 6: Alternative/Balanced Thoughts. The idea is to now return to your original negative automatic thought/s and to reconsider it/them in the light of all the evidence of Columns 4 and 5 in the round. Having considered all the evidence, try to restate the thought/s in a way that takes account of all the evidence, not just the negative evidence. Remember to rate your belief in each of these new thoughts. Later in therapy, these new thoughts may be worked on to strengthen them. How you rate these new thoughts at various points in time can indicate how quickly you are moving towards a ‘new plan’.

Column 7: Rate moods now. The final step is to go back to the moods in column 2 and to re-rate them. This helps us to see what effect doing the thought record has had on your mood. Sometimes this will be to sharply reduce the negative feelings. At other times, only small or no reductions occur at an individual attempt – though persistence in keeping thought records nearly always results in significant improvement.

It is sometimes helpful to add an extra question to Column 7 – ‘Now what can I do?’ Sometimes, when you have had a positive mood change, it is good to make an action plan at that moment – ‘there is no time like the present!’