

# The Study of Cognitive Rehabilitation Effectiveness

The SCORE clinical trial is a randomized controlled treatment trial evaluating the effectiveness of cognitive rehabilitation in post-deployment military service members who sustained a concussion.

*Chapter 5:  
Integrated  
Behavioral Health  
and Cognitive  
Rehabilitation  
Interventions for  
Persistent  
Symptoms  
Following Mild  
Traumatic Brain  
Injury (SCORE  
Arm 4)*

*Part VI: Client  
Manual for  
Individual  
Behavioral Health  
Therapy Protocol*

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Congress established DVBIC in 1992 after the first Gulf War in response to the need to treat service members with TBI. DVBIC's staff serves as the Defense Department's primary TBI subject matter experts. DVBIC is part of the U.S. Military Health System and is the TBI operational component of the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE). Learn more about DVBIC at [dvbic.dcoe.mil](http://dvbic.dcoe.mil).

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## SCORE Disclaimer

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# **Chapter 5: Integrated Behavioral Health and Cognitive Rehabilitation Interventions for Persistent Symptoms Following Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (SCORE Arm 4)**

## **Part VI**

### **Client Manual for Individual Behavioral Health Therapy Protocol**

#### **Introduction**

This manual contains some important principles that will help you to understand and develop some new skills aimed at improving your attention and concentration. The manual is divided into five major topics, which correspond to each therapy session you will participate in:

1. Setting Goals for Therapy
2. Introduction to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
3. Defusion
4. Cognitive Distortions
5. Schema

You will be exploring these topics in treatment sessions with your clinician each week. This manual is intended as a guide and reference to help walk you through each topic.

## Session 1: Setting Goals for Therapy

Today's session is designed to help you identify your problems and let your therapist know what you want to work on – your goals. In addition, you and your therapist will talk about how to best reach your goals, and you will begin your work toward accomplishing them. The following material is designed to help you further clarify your goals. You will also learn about a phenomenon called the stress response, which is a crucial part of understanding your problems.

### For today:

Today's session is about setting your goals for therapy. This session will assist you to do the following:

- Identify and prioritize your problem inventory
- Set positive goals for therapy
- Learn about the stress response and one way to effectively manage it

### Your Problem Inventory

During your first session with your therapist, you identified a list of problems that you are currently struggling with, for example, “I can't sleep” or “I'm anxious all the time” or “I'm depressed.” Please use the space below to list the problems you identified with your therapist. After you complete your list, go back and rank each of these problems according to their level of importance for you.

	Current Problem	Rank
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

### The Miracle Question

Now, let's take this a step further. It is all well and good to know what your problems are, but focusing too much on them can quickly become overwhelming. Instead, we will try a different approach.

Take each item from your problem list and think about how your life might be different (and what you might do differently) if that problem were suddenly lifted. The point of this exercise is to not think about what you might like to do on just one given day if your problems were not plaguing you (e.g., “My depression is gone, I'm going to Disneyland!”). Instead, the point is to think more broadly about how your life course would change if your constant struggle with a certain problem were no

longer an issue. For example, what would be different in areas such as your **family life**, your **social life**, your **career**, your **leisure time**, and your **health**?

Do not worry if you think you do not have a good grip on this yet; just go with your gut instinct. Somewhere within yourself you probably have some idea about the things that really matter to you. Concentrate on those.

Some examples of things that may matter include the following:

- “If anger weren’t such a problem for me, I would have more meaningful relationships with my family”
- “If I didn’t have so much anxiety, I would work harder and I would maybe try to find the job I always dreamed of having”
- “If I weren’t so depressed, I would get out more and participate more fully in life”

Now, fill in the blank lines below about what you would do if a certain problem disappeared. Be honest with yourself and think about what you really want. *Think about what has value to you. Think about what gives your life meaning.*

1. If \_\_\_\_\_ weren’t such a problem for me, I would:

---

---

2. If \_\_\_\_\_ weren’t such a problem for me, I would:

---

---

3. If \_\_\_\_\_ weren’t such a problem for me, I would:

---

---

4. If \_\_\_\_\_ weren’t such a problem for me, I would:

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## Setting Positive Goals

The last exercise was intended to get you started on the idea of setting **positive** goals. When dealing with problems, people often limit themselves by focusing only on eliminating or avoiding the problem. These are affectionately nicknamed **dead man goals**.

Dead man goals are goals that a dead person could always do better than you. For example, a dead person would almost always do better than you at “being less anxious” or “arguing less with my husband/wife” or “stop withdrawing from people.” *Put another way, dead man goals are like giving someone directions to your house by only telling them which streets **not** to go down!*

In contrast, it is usually much more helpful to set positive goals you can work **toward**, not away from. Reformulating the examples in a more positive way might lead to goals such as “being more productive at work” or “being more supportive of my husband/wife” or “spending time connecting with friends and family.”

Lastly, the more **specific** you make your goals, the better. Having specific goals will allow you to better determine whether they have been accomplished. Goals often can be clarified by specifying when, where, and how your actions will be done. For example, a more specific set of goals might be “spending at least two hours every day catching up at work” or “helping my husband/wife during this stressful week by doing the dishes every night” or “inviting some friends out to dinner on Friday.”

Identify your goals for therapy below, taking care to ensure that they are both **specific** and **positive** (i.e., not dead man goals).

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

**TIP** → Try using your responses to the Miracle Question worksheet as a guide to help generate goals in various areas of your life.

## Communicating What You Want

It is important to make sure that you and your therapist agree on your goals for therapy before proceeding further. Here are a few important questions to make sure you are ready to begin:

1. Does the treatment plan discussed in the initial session with your psychologist include all of the problems and goals you identified above?

Yes: \_\_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Does your psychologist agree with the order of importance of your problems and goals?

Yes: \_\_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_\_

If your answer to both questions was “Yes,” then your treatment plan is likely a good representation of your own goals for therapy. If your answer was “No,” what was in the treatment plan that was not listed in your goals? Or, was there something left out of your treatment plan that should have been there? Please let your psychologist know, so that he or she can work with you on making the necessary changes.

### Homework

Once you have completed your problem list and identified some positive and specific goals for therapy, you are ready to begin learning some effective stress management techniques. We will begin with a discussion of the “fight-or-flight” or stress response and how that relates to every day stressors you typically experience.

After reading about the fight-or-flight response, please begin practicing **abdominal breathing**, which is a very effective way to manage your stress response.

## The Stress Response

### What causes stress?

Some of the early research on stress established the existence of the stress response, otherwise known as the “fight-or-flight” response. The fight-or-flight response is a survival-based response composed of a set of hormones that are naturally released whenever you perceive a threat to your well-being. These hormones kick-start a variety of functions as they attempt to help you deal with the threat. They increase breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure to deliver more oxygen and blood sugar to power important muscles; they increase sweating in an effort to cool muscles and help them stay efficient; and they divert blood away from the skin to the core of your body, reducing blood loss if your body is injured.

However, the fight-or-flight response can be triggered by non-life-threatening events as well. In fact, we experience it almost daily, any time we come across something unexpected or something that challenges us or frustrates our goals. Although we often do not notice it among the many other distractions during stressful situations, chronic mobilization of the body’s defenses in this way can have negative consequences, both physically (e.g., increased pain), cognitively (e.g., poorer memory/attention) and emotionally (e.g., increased anxiety and irritability).

There are very few situations in modern life where the fight-or-flight stress response is useful. Instead, most situations benefit from a calm, rational, controlled, and socially sensitive approach. Therefore, an initial approach to stress management involves better managing the fight-or-flight response in our daily lives.

Components of the fight-or-flight response include the following systems:

- **Cardiopulmonary.** Your heart begins to pound and breathing becomes more rapid as your body attempts to transport more oxygen and nutrients to your muscles
- **Musculoskeletal.** Muscles become very tense in anticipation of having to act quickly and at full strength. Sweating is triggered to cool down muscles, making them more efficient
- **Nervous.** Processing of information speeds up but can become more error prone

### **Managing the fight-or-flight response**

Over the years, we have learned that the fight-or-flight response can be weakened, and sometimes made to go away altogether, if any one of the physical components of the response can be reversed. Thus, if a person can learn to manage his or her breathing or heart rate, the entire fight-or-flight response is weakened. Similarly, if a person can reduce muscle tension, the entire response is weakened.

Abdominal breathing is actually one of the most effective means to manage the fight-or-flight response. Follow the instructions to learn how to effectively utilize this technique.



## Exercise: Abdominal Breathing

### Basics of breathing:

- Shallow, quick breathing is one of the hallmarks of stress. This type of breathing can lead to feeling dizziness, tingling sensations, and confusion, all of which further contribute to stress
- Abdominal breathing is the opposite of this stressed breathing pattern. Abdominal breathing stimulates the part of our nervous system that slows down the heart and the body, leading to a feeling of calmness and peace
- Rest one hand on your abdomen and one on your chest and notice how you are breathing. If most of the movement is in your chest, you can definitely benefit from practicing the habit of abdominal breathing. If, however, your abdomen was gently rising and falling like a balloon being gently inflated and deflated, congratulations, you're already breathing in a calming and health promoting way

### Instructions for abdominal breathing:

1. Find a comfortable and quiet location. Sit straight up or lie down so that you can have full expansion of your lungs.
2. Inhale slowly and deeply, letting your abdomen move outward in a relaxed and automatic way as the air fills your lungs.
3. After you've taken a full breath, exhale slowly and fully while slowly saying "relax." Focus attention on your breath as it flows from your body, noticing the feel of the air as it moves past your nostrils.
4. Pause for a count of 3 or 4 seconds before inhaling again. Breathe deeply and fully in with a relaxed pace and good depth, using smooth inhalations and exhalations.
5. Repeat the entire breathing sequence 10-15 times.

#### TIP →

- Expand the diaphragm on each breath in while keeping the chest still
- Practice this breathing exercise at least twice daily, 10 minutes each time
- This technique is a lot harder than it looks, and will likely take a few weeks to master

## Session 2: Introduction to Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive-behavioral therapy or “CBT” is a short-term, focused therapy that can be helpful for a wide range of emotional problems, including depression, anxiety, anger, fear, and even alcohol/substance abuse. The focus of therapy is on how you are thinking, behaving, and communicating *today*, rather than on your early childhood experiences.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that cognitive-behavioral therapy is at least as effective as medication for such problems. Furthermore, because you learn self-help skills in therapy, you will be better able to maintain your improvement after therapy has ended.

Some other forms of therapy are unstructured, but in cognitive-behavioral therapy, you and your therapist will set an agenda for each session. The agenda might include a review of your experience in the previous session, a discussion of current problems, introduction of new material and homework for the next week.

Homework, in particular, is a very important component of therapy. Think about it this way: If you went to a personal trainer at a health club, you would expect to get guidance on how to exercise when the trainer is not there. The same thing is true in cognitive-behavioral therapy. *What you learn in therapy is what you practice outside of therapy on your own.* Research demonstrates that patients who carry out homework assignments improve more quickly and maintain their improvement longer. Your self-help assignments might include keeping track of your moods, thoughts, and behaviors, as well as practicing strategies for dealing with unpleasant thoughts and emotions.

### For today:

Today’s session is about the way you think and how it affects the way you feel. This session will assist you to do the following:

- Discover how your thoughts influence your feelings
- Learn how to identify your unhelpful thoughts

## The Relationship Between Thoughts and Feelings

The way you think has a direct impact on the way you feel and behave. For instance, positive thoughts often generate pleasant feelings (happy, hopeful, content), whereas negative thinking often leads to unpleasant feelings (anxiety, frustration, anger, sadness). Read the examples below:

### Example 1

Imagine the following situation: You are waiting to be picked up from work by a friend. He is 15 minutes late. Depending on how you interpret the situation, it may cause you to feel differently.

**Situation:** You are waiting to be picked up from work by a friend. She is 15 minutes late.

**Thoughts** (your interpretation of the situation): “I’m going to wait and wait, but she’s forgotten to pick me up. She doesn’t really care. She’s selfish.”

**Feelings** (your reaction to your thoughts): You feel angry, upset, and let down.

We often assume that the situation is what causes a feeling; however, it’s not that simple. Situations do not themselves cause your feelings. There is an intervening step that affects how we feel. From

moment to moment, we make mental interpretations of every situation that happens around us. These interpretations are usually based on our beliefs and values, and occur in the form of **thoughts**. *It is our thoughts that produce the emotions we feel, not the situations themselves.*

That is, a situation produces a thought (or interpretation), which in turn produces a feeling.

## Situation → Thought → Feeling

Imagine what you would feel if you replaced the thoughts from Example 1 with those from Example 2.

### Example 2

**Situation:** You are waiting to be picked up from work by a friend. She is 15 minutes late.

**Thoughts** (your interpretation of the situation): “The traffic is always heavy at this time of the day. She’s probably just caught up in traffic.”

**Feelings** (your reaction to your thoughts): Most likely you will remain calm and relaxed and have more patience while waiting for your friend.

You can see that although the situation was the same in the previous two examples, *the way you interpret the situation* can change the way you feel.

Unfortunately, in Example 1, the longer the friend takes to get there, the worse you may feel. It is a vicious cycle, where you continuously generate negative thoughts that can spiral into increasingly unpleasant feelings (see Example 3).

### Example 3

**Situation:** You are waiting to be picked up from work by a friend. She is 15 minutes late.

**Thoughts:** “I’m going to wait and wait, but she’s forgotten to pick me up. She doesn't really care. She’s selfish.”

**Feelings:** You feel angry, upset, and let down.

**Thoughts:** “Everyone is staring at me like I’m a loser. I’m just waiting here looking stupid and no one is coming to pick me up.”

**Feelings:** You feel even angrier, and begin to get anxious as well.

**Thoughts:** “Why do things like this always seem to happen? Nothing ever goes right for me!”

**Feelings:** You begin to feel depressed.

## Automatic Thoughts

The problem is that the sequence of events illustrated in Example 1 often occurs very quickly. The thoughts pop into your head without any conscious effort on your part, and can often go unrecognized, leading most people to assume that the situation itself was directly responsible for their feelings. But you now recognize that somewhere in between, your thoughts intervened to produce those unpleasant feelings. We call these types of thoughts **automatic thoughts**.

Automatic thoughts are usually based on core beliefs we hold about ourselves, other people, and the world around us. Although we often do not recognize their role, they control the majority of our reactions to the situations we encounter throughout our lives. In fact, if you look closely behind most of your strong emotional reactions, you can most likely identify that it is your thoughts that are really pulling the strings.

### Example 4

Let's compare the thoughts of four people waiting at the bus stop for a bus that is late.

**Julie** is excited as she believes she might miss a day at school if the bus does not show up. Julie does not like school!

Situation	→	Thought	→	Feeling
Bus is late	→	"I may not have to go to school!"	→	happy, excited

**Pete** is irritated as the later the bus is the later he will get to work, and thus his work will pile up on his desk, with less time to finish it.

Situation	→	Thought	→	Feeling
Bus late	→	"The work will pile up on my desk!"	→	irritated, anxious

**Karen** is not aware that the bus is late as she is sitting and reading and making use of the time before the bus arrives.

Situation	→	Thought	→	Feeling
Bus late	→	no thoughts, not aware it is late!	→	calm, relaxed

**Andrew** is concerned as the later the bus is, the longer his friend will have to wait for him at the other end, and he is worried the friend may assume he is not coming if the bus takes too long.

Situation	→	Thought	→	Feeling
Bus late	→	"My friend may not wait for me!"	→	worried

As you can see, although their situations are identical, all four people feel very differently. This is the result of their very different thoughts and interpretations of the situation. *So remember: Situations do not themselves produce feelings. Rather, our thoughts and interpretations of situations are what determine our feelings.*

### Characteristics of automatic thoughts

Because automatic thoughts affect how you feel, it is important to take the time to learn more about them. Here are a few characteristics of automatic thoughts that are important to know:

- They often occur in the form of judgments (usually negative) about yourself or the world around you
- Because they are formed so quickly (i.e., automatic), they are usually biased or distorted, meaning they are not an accurate evaluation of your situation
- They are involuntary and occur constantly, 24 hours a day
- They are often unhelpful and can prevent you from achieving your goals
- They are very difficult to control

## Having difficulty identifying your thoughts?

Most people have difficulty when attempting to identify their automatic thoughts for the first time. When trying to identify your thoughts, keep in mind that often automatic thoughts fall into one of three categories:

- Judgments about **YOURSELF**  
For example: "I'm incompetent...or...I'm hopeless...or...I'm a bad person"
- Judgments about **OTHER PEOPLE**  
For example: "People are selfish...or...people are untrustworthy"
- Judgments about the **WORLD AROUND YOU**  
For example: "The world is a dangerous place...or...my life sucks"

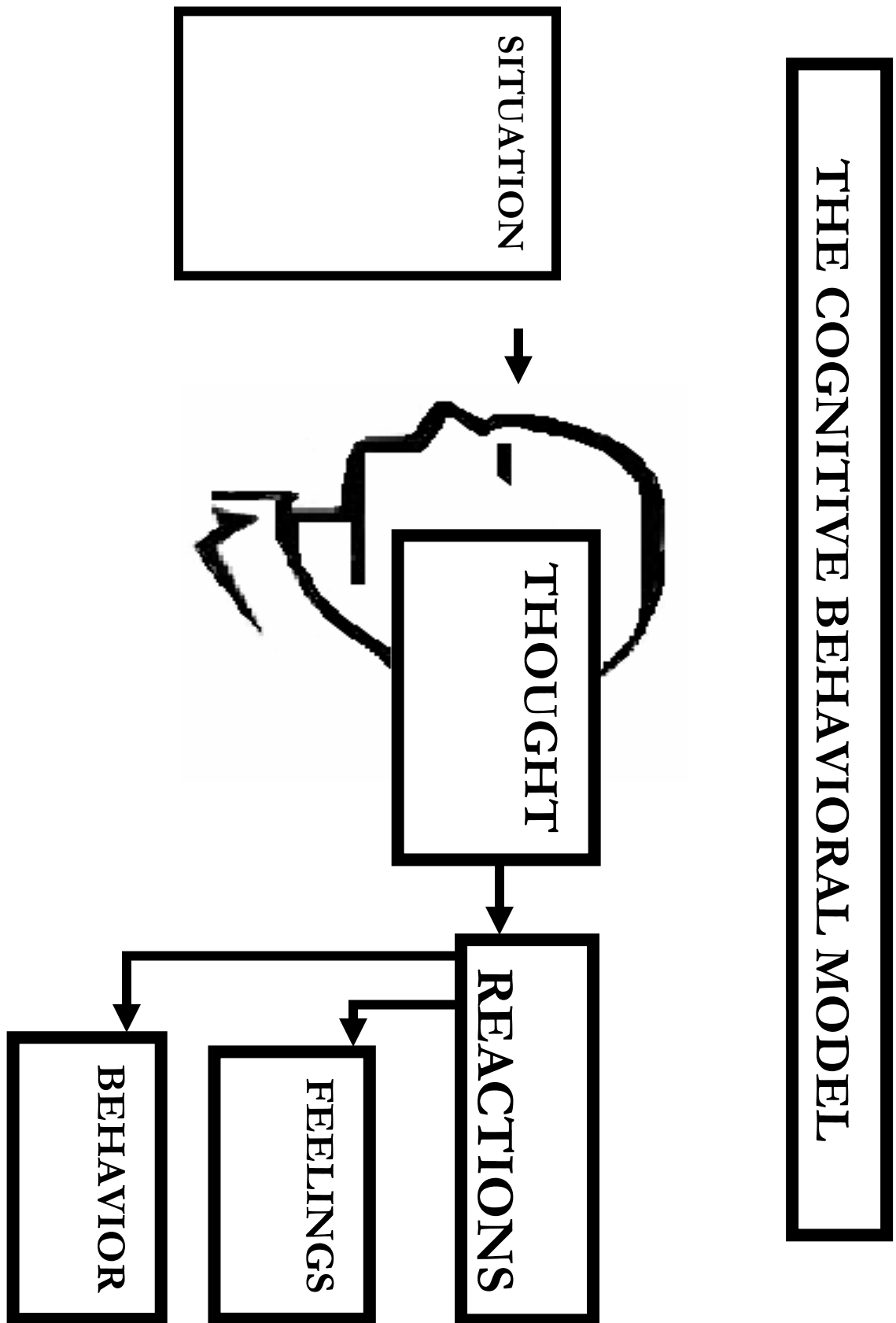
The following guidelines are intended to help you begin to identify your automatic thoughts. In any situation in which you feel a strong unpleasant emotion, ask yourself:

- Am I making any judgments about myself based on the situation?
- Is there anyone else involved in the situation? If so, what judgments am I making about them?
- What judgments am I making about the world around me based on the situation?

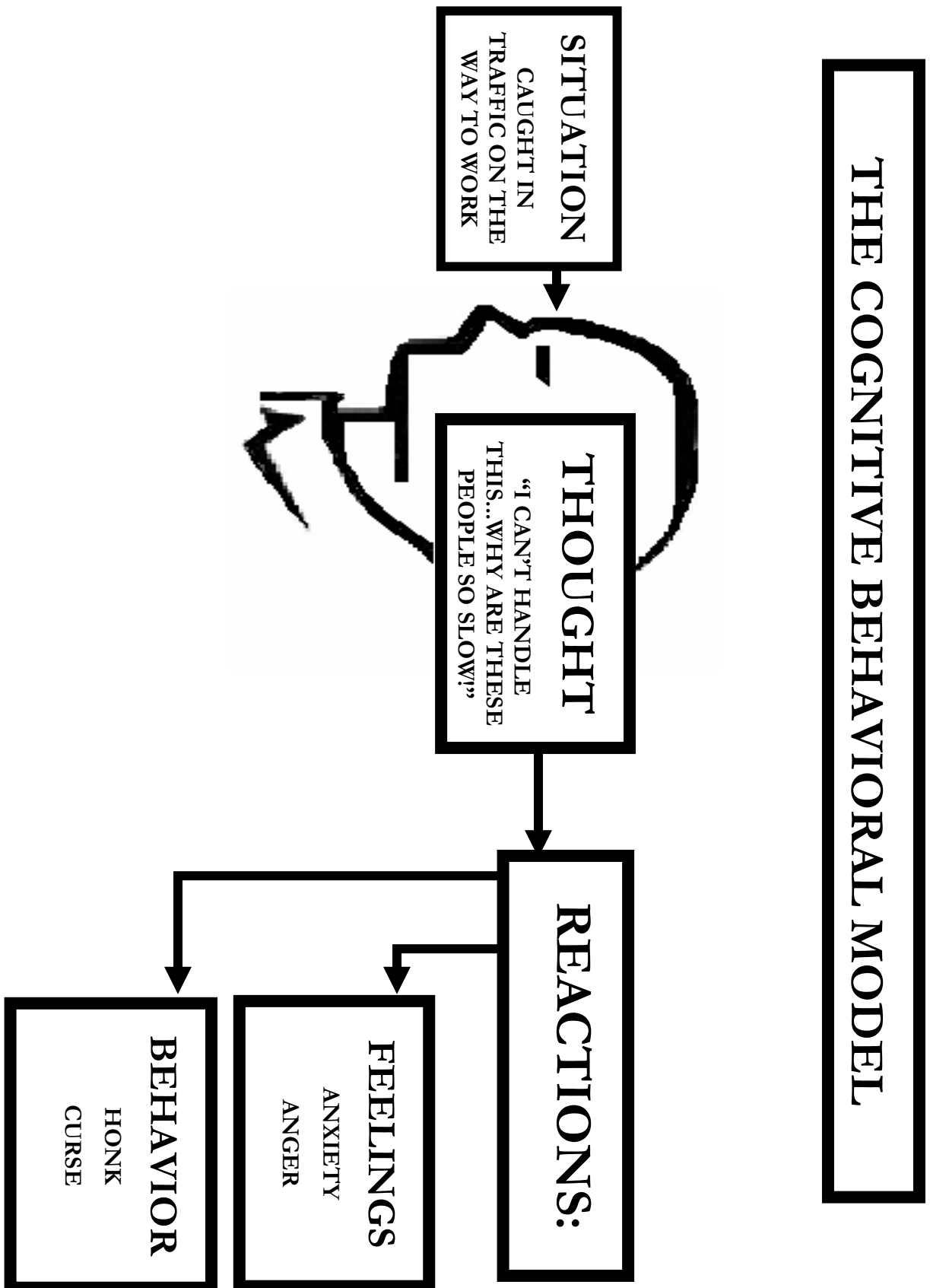
Sometimes the feelings you record may seem too extreme to be explained by the automatic thoughts you are able to identify. That is, they just don't seem to match up very well. In those cases, chances are you need to dig deeper to identify what other thoughts may also be present.

Review the cognitive-behavioral therapy diagram on the next page.

**Diagram: The Cognitive-Behavioral Model**



**Diagram: The Cognitive Behavioral Model, Completed**



## **Exercise: Start Practicing Identifying Our Thoughts**

### **Homework**

Please use the Thought Record worksheets (excluding the Cognitive Distortions column) on the following pages to begin cataloguing situations that trigger strong feelings for you over the next several weeks. It is important to practice what you learn inside therapy on your own *outside* of therapy, remembering that patients who carry out homework assignments improve more quickly and maintain their improvement longer after therapy has ended. Whenever you are feeling a strong emotion, record the following:

- The situation
- Your thoughts
- Your feelings
- A rating of the intensity of your feelings (out of 10)
- Please disregard the “Cognitive Distortions” column for now.

### **ALSO:**

Continue to practice abdominal breathing to help manage your stress response.

Please remember to complete any group homework exercises you have been assigned from the group therapy portion of the program.



## Thought Records

<b>THOUGHT RECORD</b>				
<b>Directions:</b> When you experience a strong feeling, notice your thoughts and reactions and jot them down afterward as soon as possible.				
<b>Date/ Time</b>	<b>Situation</b> <small>Describe the situation in detail.</small>	<b>Thought(s)</b> <small>Write automatic thoughts that preceded your reactions.</small>	<b>Reactions</b> <small>1. Feelings: Specify and rate degree of feeling 0-100% 2. Behaviors: What did you do?</small>	<b>Cognitive Distortions</b> <small>Use your cognitive distortions list to identify any errors in thinking that occurred.</small>

### THOUGHT RECORD

**Directions:** When you experience a strong feeling, notice your thoughts and reactions and jot them down afterward as soon as possible.

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## Session 3: Defusion

### For today:

Today's session will present a strategy to help you deal more effectively with unpleasant thoughts and feelings. This session will assist you to do the following:

- Become more familiar with how your mind works
- Evaluate the effectiveness of past attempts at controlling your thoughts and feelings
- Consider a new perspective on dealing with unpleasant thoughts and feelings

### Anatomy of the Mind: Thinking Versus Observing

By this point, you have spent some time becoming more familiar with your thoughts, and how much they impact your feelings daily. With regard to understanding how thoughts are produced, know that there are two very distinct parts of our mind. There's the part we're all very familiar with – the part that thinks and analyzes. For our purposes, let us call that the “thinking self.”

But there is another part of the mind that virtually never gets talked about. It is a part of our mind that has a unique ability: It doesn't think; it just notices. It notices whatever we're thinking, feeling, doing, seeing, hearing, tasting and so on. The closest words we have to describe this part of our mind in everyday language are “awareness” or “attention.” For our purposes, we will call it the “observing self” because that's what it does. It doesn't think or analyze; it merely observes.

### Example

Have you ever encountered a particularly beautiful sunset, and for a moment, your thinking self goes quiet. There are no thoughts; you're just silently observing this amazing sunset. That's your observing self in action – silently noticing. But the silence doesn't last long. Within moments, the thinking self pipes up:

“Oh, look at all those colors. I wish I had my camera. This reminds me of that trip to Hawaii.”

As you get more and more caught up in your thoughts, you gradually start to disconnect from just appreciating the beauty of the sunset.

So, there is a part of us that can simply notice everything that we see, hear, touch, taste, smell, think, and feel. It is similar to watching a stage show. On that stage are all our thoughts, our feelings, and everything that we can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. The observing self is that part of us that can step back and watch the stage show. It has the ability to direct our attention to focus more closely on any part of the show, or to just step back and take it all in at once.

### The Great Storyteller<sup>1</sup>

The “thinking self” part of our mind loves telling stories. It is constantly comparing, judging, evaluating, and criticizing. All day, every day, it tells us stories about such things as what we should be doing with our life, what other people think of us, what might go wrong in the future, what went wrong in the past, and so on. It is like a 24-hour radio station that never stops broadcasting.

Time and time again we get caught up and entangled in these stories, to the point that they can take up much of our time and energy, and distract us from what we really want to be doing with our life. Even worse, a lot of these stories are really negative – stories such as, “I'm not good enough,” “I

can't handle this," "My life is terrible," "I'm useless," "Things will never improve," "I'll never be happy," etc.

What's important for you to know is that there is nothing abnormal in this. In fact, research suggests that about 80 percent of people's thoughts have some negative content. Unfortunately, much of the time we get hooked onto these thoughts, taking them far too seriously and giving them far too much attention. And, by doing that, you can see how these stories can readily feed into anxiety, depression, anger, low self-esteem, self-doubt, and insecurity. Take a moment to consider that these thoughts are essentially nothing more than a collection of words and stories that our "thinking self" is telling us.

## The Myth of Control<sup>1</sup>

The human mind has given us an enormous advantage as a species. It enables us to exercise control over the material world around us by analyzing problems, making plans, coordinating effective action, and learning from our experiences. In the material world, these control strategies generally work well. If we don't like something, we figure out how to avoid it or get rid of it. A wolf outside your door? Get rid of it! Throw rocks at it, or spears, or shoot it. Snow, rain, or hail? Well, you can't get rid of those things, but you can avoid them by hiding in a cave or building a shelter.

But how much control do we have in our internal world; the world of thoughts, memories, feelings, urges, and sensations? Can we simply avoid or get rid of the ones we don't like?

### Example

For the next 20 seconds, try not to think about a yellow Jeep.<sup>2</sup>

\*\*\*

How did you do? If you're like most, you couldn't *stop* thinking about a yellow Jeep.

Now try this one. Bring to mind your earliest childhood memory. Get a picture of it in your head. Got it? Now delete it. Totally obliterate that memory so it can never come back to you again.

\*\*\*

How did it go? Now, imagine someone puts a loaded gun to your head and tells you that you must remain calm; that if you feel even the slightest trace of anxiety, then they will pull the trigger. Could you completely stop yourself feeling anxious in that situation, even though your life depends on it?

Hopefully by now you are getting the point that thoughts, feelings, sensations, and memories are just not that easy to control. It is not that we do not have *any* control; it is just that we have much less control than we think. If these things were that easy to control, wouldn't we all just live in perpetual bliss?

The problem is, from a young age most of us believe that we should be able to control what we think and feel to some extent. But although we have tried countless strategies to make this happen, we have had very little long-term success. This series of "failures" often only serves to make us feel worse.

So if you have tried quite a few strategies to control unpleasant thoughts and feelings, without much success, why not try a different approach?

## Fusion and Defusion

Recall the “observing self” and the example of the stage show above. What this suggests is that, although we often cannot control our thoughts and feelings, we *can* control how closely we pay attention to them versus other things in our environment. We know that our “thinking self” will generate thoughts 24 hours a day, but our “observing self” has the ability to step back from those thoughts and direct our attention instead to more meaningful and important activities.

How do we determine when to, and not to, pay attention to our thoughts? Our main interest in determining whether to pay attention to a thought is not whether it is true or false, but whether it is helpful. That is, *by paying attention to this thought, will it help us achieve our goals and create the life we want?*

Two concepts are important in learning to skillfully redirect your attention away from unhelpful thoughts: fusion and defusion.

**Fusion** means getting caught up or hooked on our thoughts. You can think of it as being welded or bonded to them, so entangled with them that we often are not even aware that we are thinking. In a state of fusion, our thoughts dominate our feelings and behavior; they push us around and tell us what to do.

**Defusion**, on the other hand, means separating, detaching, or distancing from our thoughts. Instead of getting hooked, we take a step back, as if watching a stage show, and seeing them for what they are: nothing more or less than a collection of words, stories, and pictures.

Remember, although the majority of thoughts are negative and unhelpful, not everyone struggles with their thoughts. This suggests that unpleasant thoughts and stories are not a problem in their own right. It is only when we “fuse” with them – when we react as if they are true and give them our full attention – that they become problematic.

### Example

Imagine for a moment that your hands represent the unhelpful stream of thoughts that your mind constantly produces. When you reach the end of this paragraph, I’d like you to put this packet down and hold your hands together, palms open, as if they’re the pages of an open book. Then I’d like you to slowly and steadily raise your hands up toward your face. Keep going until they’re covering your eyes. Then take a few seconds to look at the world around you through the gaps in between your fingers and notice how this affects your view of the world. Please do this exercise now, before reading on.

\*\*\*

What would it be like going around all day with your hands covering your eyes in this manner? How much would it limit you? How much would you miss out on? How much would it reduce your ability to respond effectively to the world around you? This is like fusion: we become so hooked on our thoughts that we lose contact with the real world around us, and our thoughts have such a huge influence over our behavior that our ability to respond effectively to the world is significantly reduced.

Now once again, when you reach the end of this paragraph, I’d like you to cover your eyes with your hands, but this time, pull them away from your face very, very slowly. As the distance between your hands and your face increases, notice how much easier it is to connect with the world around you. Please do this now before reading on.

\*\*\*

What you just did is like defusion. How much easier is it to take effective action without your hands covering your eyes? How much more information can you take in? How much more connected are you with the world around you?

So the purpose of defusion is to help redirect your attention away from unhelpful thoughts so that you can more fully more engage in pursuing goals to create the life you want. Defusion is not some clever tool to control or get rid of unpleasant feelings. Rather, it is a means to refocus and stop letting your thoughts push you around and prevent you from living a meaningful life. This is an important distinction, because *if you start using defusion to try to control your feelings, you'll soon be disappointed*. You can learn to use defusion through practice and use of a number of experiential exercises:

### **Homework**

1. Please continue to use the Thought Record worksheets from Session 2 to catalogue situations that trigger strong feelings for you
2. Review the worksheet below on defusion techniques and begin utilizing them daily to practice unhooking from unhelpful thoughts. Make sure to try each of the techniques a few times before settling on the two or three that seem most helpful for you. *Remember, the purpose of these techniques is not to get rid of unpleasant feelings, but to help you refocus your attention towards pursuing goals to create the life you want.*

### **ALSO:**

- Continue to practice abdominal breathing to help manage your stress response
- Please remember to complete any group homework exercises you have been assigned from the group therapy portion of the program

## Defusion Techniques<sup>1</sup>

### What is fusion?

To fuse means to blend or meld together. Think of two sheets of metal that are fused together. In a state of fusion, it seems as if:

- Thoughts are reality; what we're thinking is actually happening
- Thoughts are the truth; we completely believe them
- Thoughts are important; we need to take them seriously and give them our full attention

### What is defusion?

Defusion means learning to separate yourself from your thoughts, relating to them in a new and different way, so they have much less impact and influence over you. As you learn to defuse unhelpful thoughts, they will lose their ability to disturb, worry, stress, or depress you. In a state of defusion, we recognize that:

- Thoughts are merely words, stories, or mental pictures
- Thoughts may or may not be true; we shouldn't automatically believe them
- Thoughts may or may not be important; we only need to pay attention if they're helpful

## Exercises to Defuse Unpleasant Thoughts

### Labeling Your Thoughts

To begin this exercise, first bring to mind an upsetting thought that takes the form "I am X." For example, "I'm not good enough" or "I'm incompetent." Preferably pick a thought that often recurs and that usually bothers or upsets you. Now focus on that thought and believe it as much as you can for 10 seconds.

\*\*\*

Next, take that thought and in front of it, insert this phrase: "I'm having the thought that..." Play that thought again, but this time with the phrase attached. Think to yourself, "I'm having the thought that X." Notice what happens.

\*\*\*

Now do that again, but this time the phrase is slightly longer: "I notice I'm having the thought that..." Think to yourself, "I notice I'm having the thought that I am X." Notice what happens.

\*\*\*

So what happened? You probably found that inserting those phrases instantly gave you some distance from the actual thought; as if you "stepped back" from it. You can use this technique with any unpleasant thought, to step back and see the thought for what it is: nothing more than words passing through your head.



## **Musical thoughts**

Bring to mind a negative self-judgment that commonly bothers you when it comes up. For example, “I’m such an idiot.” Now hold that thought in your mind and really believe it as much as you can for about 10 seconds. Notice how it affects you.

\*\*\*

Now imagine taking that same thought and singing it to yourself to the tune of “Happy Birthday.” Sing it silently inside your head. Notice what happens.

\*\*\*

Now go back to the thought in its original form. Once again, hold it in your mind and believe it as much as you can for about 10 seconds. Notice how it affects you.

\*\*\*

Now imagine taking that thought and singing it to the tune of “Jingle Bells.” Sing it silently inside your head. Notice what happens.

\*\*\*

After doing this exercise, you probably found that by now you are not taking that thought quite so seriously, and you are not buying into it as much. Notice that you have not challenged the thought at all, tried to get rid of it, debated whether it is true or false, or tried to replace it with a positive thought.

## **Naming your stories**

Identify your mind’s favorite stories, and then give them names, such as the “I’m a failure” story, the “my life sucks” story, or the “I can’t do it” story. Often there will be several variations on a theme.

\*\*\*

When your stories show up, identify them by name. For example, you could say to yourself, “Ah yes. I recognize this. That old favorite, the ‘I’m a failure’ story.” Or “Aha! Here comes the ‘I can’t do it’ story.”

\*\*\*

Once you’ve acknowledged a story, that’s it; just let it be. You don’t have to challenge it or push it away, nor do you have to give it much attention. Simply let it come and go as it pleases, while you channel your energies instead into doing something of value.

## **Thanking your mind**

This is a simple and effective defusion technique. When your mind starts coming up with those same old stories, simply thank it. You could say to yourself (silently) things such as, “Thank you, Mind! How very informative!” or “Thanks for sharing!” or “Is that right? How fascinating!” or simply, “Thanks, Mind!”

When thanking your mind, don’t do it sarcastically or aggressively. Do it with warmth and humor and with a genuine appreciation for the amazing storytelling ability of your mind.

## **Silly voices**

This technique is particularly good with recurrent negative self-judgments. Find a thought that upsets or bothers you. Focus on the thought for 10 seconds, believing it as much as possible. Notice how it affects you.

Then pick an animated cartoon character with a humorous voice, such as Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Shrek, or Homer Simpson. Now bring the troubling thought to mind, but “hear” it in the cartoon character’s voice, as if that character were speaking your thoughts out loud. Notice what happens.

Now get the negative thought back in its original form and again believe it as much as possible. Notice how it affects you.

Next, pick a different cartoon character or a character from a movie or television show. Consider fantasy characters such as Darth Vader, Yoda, or someone from your favorite sitcom, or actors with distinctive voices, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger or Eddie Murphy. Once again bring the distressing thought to mind and “hear” it in that voice. Notice what happens.

## **Pop-up mind**

Imagine that your unpleasant thoughts are like internet pop-up ads, and treat them as such. Close them as they pop up in order to resume your business surfing the web of life.

## **Exercises to Defuse Unpleasant Images**

### **The television screen**

Bring an unpleasant image to mind and notice how it is affecting you.

Now imagine there is a small television screen across the room from you. Place your image on the television screen. Play around with the image: flip it upside down, turn it on its side, spin it around and around, stretch it sideways. If it’s a moving video clip, play it in slow motion. Then play it backward in slow motion. Then play it forward at double speed. Then reverse it at double speed. Turn the color down, so it’s all in black-and-white. Turn the color and brightness up until it’s ridiculously colorful (so people have bright orange skin and the clouds are hot pink).

The idea is not to get rid of this image, but to see it for what it is: a harmless picture. You may need to do this for anything from 10 seconds to two minutes, until you really defuse it.

### **Steps to successfully utilizing defusion:**

1. Identify the automatic thought.
2. Ask yourself: “Is this thought helpful or unhelpful?”
3. If it is unhelpful, utilize a defusion strategy to help yourself “unhook” from it.
4. *Key step* → *As you attempt to defuse the thought, engage in a productive or enjoyable activity to help focus your attention back on the present moment.*

## Session 4: Cognitive Distortions

### For today:

Today's session will present another strategy to help you deal more effectively with unpleasant thoughts and feelings.

This session will assist you to do the following:

- Learn how our thoughts about ourselves and the world around us are systematically biased, distorted, and often inaccurate
- Identify common patterns of distorted thinking
- Develop better awareness for when this is happening to you in real time

### What are Cognitive Distortions?

Up to this point, we have identified several important characteristics of automatic thoughts:

- They often occur in the form of snap judgments (usually negative) about yourself or the world around you
- Because they are formed so quickly (i.e., automatic), they are usually biased or distorted, meaning they are not an accurate evaluation of the situation you are in
- They are involuntary and occur nonstop, 24 hours a day
- They are often unhelpful and can prevent you from achieving your goals
- They are very difficult to control

Automatic thoughts are just what the name implies. They are the thoughts that occur constantly as our minds seek to evaluate what is going on around us. They assess what is going on quickly and make snap judgments based on the limited information at hand. This is very helpful in situations where a quick response is desired, like an emergency or crisis. In many other situations, however, it would be better for us to slow down, thoughtfully consider more information, and not react so quickly.

**Cognitive distortions** are a particularly problematic category of automatic thinking. They are comprised of longstanding patterns of biased and distorted thinking that we habitually develop over time. These inaccurate patterns of thinking are usually used to reinforce negative thinking or feelings. While they may appear rational at first glance, they are often negatively biased and really only serve to keep us feeling bad about ourselves.

### Examples

**Situation:** *You are waiting to be picked up from work by a friend. She is 15 minutes late.*

**Thought #1:** She's forgotten to pick me up. I knew she would forget!

You have arbitrarily predicted that why something is happening without enough supporting evidence. This type of distortion is a form of jumping to conclusions called fortune-telling.

**Thought #2:** Everyone is staring at me. They must think I'm such a loser.

You have assumed people are reacting negatively to you when there's no definite evidence for this. This type of distortion is a different form of **jumping to conclusions** called **mind-reading**.

**Thought #3:** Why do things like this always seem to happen? Nothing ever goes right for me!

You are viewing this single event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. This type of distortion is called **overgeneralization**.

### **Why is identifying cognitive distortions important?**

Cognitive distortions are habitual, biased patterns of thinking that cause people to make unhelpful and inaccurate judgments of themselves, other people and the world around them. The distorting influence of such "bad thinking habits" can be lessened by becoming more aware of which cognitive distortions you tend to habitually make. Knowing that you are vulnerable to making a particular kind of thinking mistake makes it easier for you to more easily recognize when your mind has hooked you into an unhelpful pattern of thinking during *real time*.

### **Homework**

1. Please continue to use defusion techniques to practice unhooking from unhelpful thoughts
2. Listen to the first 10 minutes of each of the three mindfulness exercises on separate days
3. Begin to practice identifying patterns of cognitive distortions by completing the following worksheet
4. Continue to use the Thought Record worksheets from Session 2 to catalogue situations that trigger strong feelings for you. Start categorizing your automatic thoughts in the final column by identifying the cognitive distortions they represent

### **ALSO:**

- Continue to practice abdominal breathing to help manage your stress response
- Please remember to complete any group homework exercises you have been assigned from the group therapy portion of the program

## Recognizing Patterns of Negative Thinking

The problem with going on automatic pilot is that when times get tough, our automatic thoughts become increasingly distorted, leading us to hold a more pessimistic outlook on life. In fact, there are specific patterns in which these distorted thinking processes occur. The trick is to develop a familiarity with these distorted thinking patterns so that you can better identify them when they occur. Here are some common examples:

### Common distorted thinking patterns

1. **All-or-Nothing Thinking.** You look at things in absolute, black-and-white, all or nothing, pass or fail categories (e.g., perfectionism, having unrealistic standards)

John recently applied for a promotion in his firm. The job went to another employee with more experience. John wanted this job badly and now feels that he will never be promoted. He feels that he is a total failure in his career.

2. **Overgeneralization.** You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat (e.g., asking, “Why does everything bad always happen to me?”)

Linda is lonely and often spends most of her time at home. Her friends sometimes ask her to come out for dinner and meet new people. Linda feels that that is it useless to try to meet people. No one really could like her. People are all mean and superficial anyway.

3. **Mental Filter.** You selectively perceive what coincides with your expectations (e.g., you expect the worst and find it)

Mary is having a really bad day at work. As she drives home, another driver cuts her off. She grumbles to herself that there are nothing but rude and selfish people in her city.

4. **Discounting the Positives.** You insist that your accomplishments of positive qualities “don’t count.” You reject positive experiences and dwell only on the negative. (e.g., only look at the bad parts of an evaluation)

Rhonda just had her portrait made. Her friend tells her how beautiful she looks. Rhonda brushes aside the compliment by saying that the photographer must have touched up the picture. She never looks that good in real life, she thinks.

5. **Jumping to Conclusions.** There are two forms.

- **Mind reading.** You assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there’s no definite evidence for this
- **Fortune-telling.** You arbitrarily predict that things will turn out badly

Chuck is waiting for his date at a restaurant. She's now 20 minutes late. Chuck laments to himself that he must have done something wrong and now she has stood him up. Meanwhile, across town, his date is stuck in traffic. (This is mind reading.)

6. **Magnification or Minimization.** You blow things way out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately (e.g., catastrophizing or denial)

Scott is playing football. He bungles a play that he's been practicing for weeks. He later scores the winning touchdown. His teammates compliment him. He tells them he should have played better; the touchdown was just dumb luck.

7. **Emotional Reasoning.** You reason from how you feel (e.g., I feel like an idiot, so I really must be one)

Laura looks around her untidy house and feels overwhelmed by the prospect of cleaning. She reasons that it's hopeless to even try to clean.

8. **Should Statements.** You criticize yourself or other people with “shoulds” or “shouldn’ts” (other examples includes “musts,” “oughts,” and “have tos”).

David is sitting in his doctor's waiting room. His doctor is running late. David sits stewing, thinking, "With how much I'm paying him, he *should* be on time. He *ought* to have more consideration." He ends up feeling bitter and resentful.

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”

Donna just cheated on her diet. *I'm a fat, lazy pig*, she thinks.

10. **Personalization and Blame.** You blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behavior might contribute to a problem (e.g., “It’s all my fault”).

Jean's son is doing poorly in school. She feels that she must be a bad mother. She feels that it's all her fault that he isn't studying.

### **Practice, practice, practice**

These negative thoughts patterns are a habit – trying to break any bad habit, requires attention, concentration, and lots of practice!

**Identifying distorted thinking patterns**

Please identify the following distorted thinking patterns.

1. “I just know I’m going to blow this test.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

2. “This has to be perfect or not at all.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

3. “You should have known better.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

4. “It’s ok, it’s not that important.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

5. “My boss will think this is crummy.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

6. “I’ve got so much to do.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

7. “He’s a real jerk.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

8. “This is all your fault.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

9. “Everything bad always happens to me.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

10. “I haven’t accomplished anything today.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

11. “No one likes me.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

12. “I must be a rotten person.”

➤ Distortions: \_\_\_\_\_

## Session 5: Schema

### For today:

Today's session will address core beliefs (schemas) and how they are often responsible for our automatic thoughts.<sup>3</sup>

This session will assist you to:

- Become more aware of your core beliefs (schemas) and how they influence your interpretations of everyday events
- Learn to distinguish between adaptive (helpful) and maladaptive (unhelpful) schemas
- Consider how selective attention works to reinforce negative schemas

### What Are Schemas?

If you have been vigilant in cataloguing your automatic thoughts over the past few weeks, you have probably begun to recognize certain themes that continually surface in your thoughts. This suggests that many of your automatic thoughts are probably directed by a smaller set of deeper beliefs about yourself and the world around you. We call these core beliefs *schemas*.

Schemas are core beliefs about the self that drive automatic thoughts. They serve as underlying rules for how we interpret our everyday experience, and have a strong influence on self-esteem and behavior.

### Adaptive and maladaptive schemas

All people have a mixture of **adaptive** (helpful) schemas and **maladaptive** (unhelpful) core beliefs:

#### Adaptive schemas

- No matter what happens, I can manage.
- If I work at something, I can master it
- I'm a survivor
- Many people are generally trustworthy
- I'm lovable.
- People respect me even if I make some mistakes.
- If I prepare in advance, I will perform well.
- There's not much that can scare me.

#### Maladaptive schemas

- If I choose to do something, I must succeed.
- I'm not good enough.
- I'm weak and stupid. I'm a fake.
- I can never be comfortable around others.
- Without a man/woman in my life, I'm nothing.
- I must be perfect to be accepted.
- No matter what I do, I won't succeed.
- The world is too frightening for me.

### Example

Mark, a middle-aged man, became depressed after being laid off. Mark was not depressed before losing his job, but he began to have many self-doubts after he had trouble finding new work. When Mark looked at the employment section of his local newspaper, he was riddled with automatic



thoughts such as “They won’t want me,” “I’ll never get a job as good as the last one,” “Even if I get an interview, I’ll choke and not know what to say.” Through his Thought Record, Mark was able to uncover several deeply held schemas about competence that had hovered below the surface for many years. One of these was “I’m not good enough,” a core belief that had been dormant in better times but was now causing a cascade of negative automatic thoughts and resulting in depression.

Schemas are the underlying rules we use to assign meaning to our everyday experiences. They start to take shape in early childhood and are influenced by a multitude of life experiences, including parental modeling, educational activities, peer experiences, traumas, and our successes and failures.

### **Selective attention**

Remember, one important characteristic of attention is that it is selective. We have the ability to pay attention to those things that we consider important to us and to ignore those that are not. One example of selective attention is the “Cocktail Party Effect” where a person is able to direct his or her attention to focus on a certain voice in a loud room.

Because our core beliefs are very important to us, we are constantly seeking information that helps us validate those beliefs. This often causes us to selectively attend only to information in our environment that supports our beliefs. A good metaphor might be to think of being at a cocktail party and selectively attending only conversations where you thought people were talking negatively about you. How might that make you feel? That’s what it’s like!

So the problem with maladaptive schemas is that they cause us to focus only on information that reinforces unhelpful beliefs about ourselves, thus perpetuating self-defeating thoughts and feelings.

Understand the types of schema we use to selectively attend to our environment because that will help you:

- Enhance your understanding of why you think and feel the way you do
- Build awareness to help focus on adaptive (helpful) versus maladaptive (unhelpful) schemas
- Make it easier to identify your mind’s stories in the moment
- Can build resilience to stressors in the future

### **Homework**

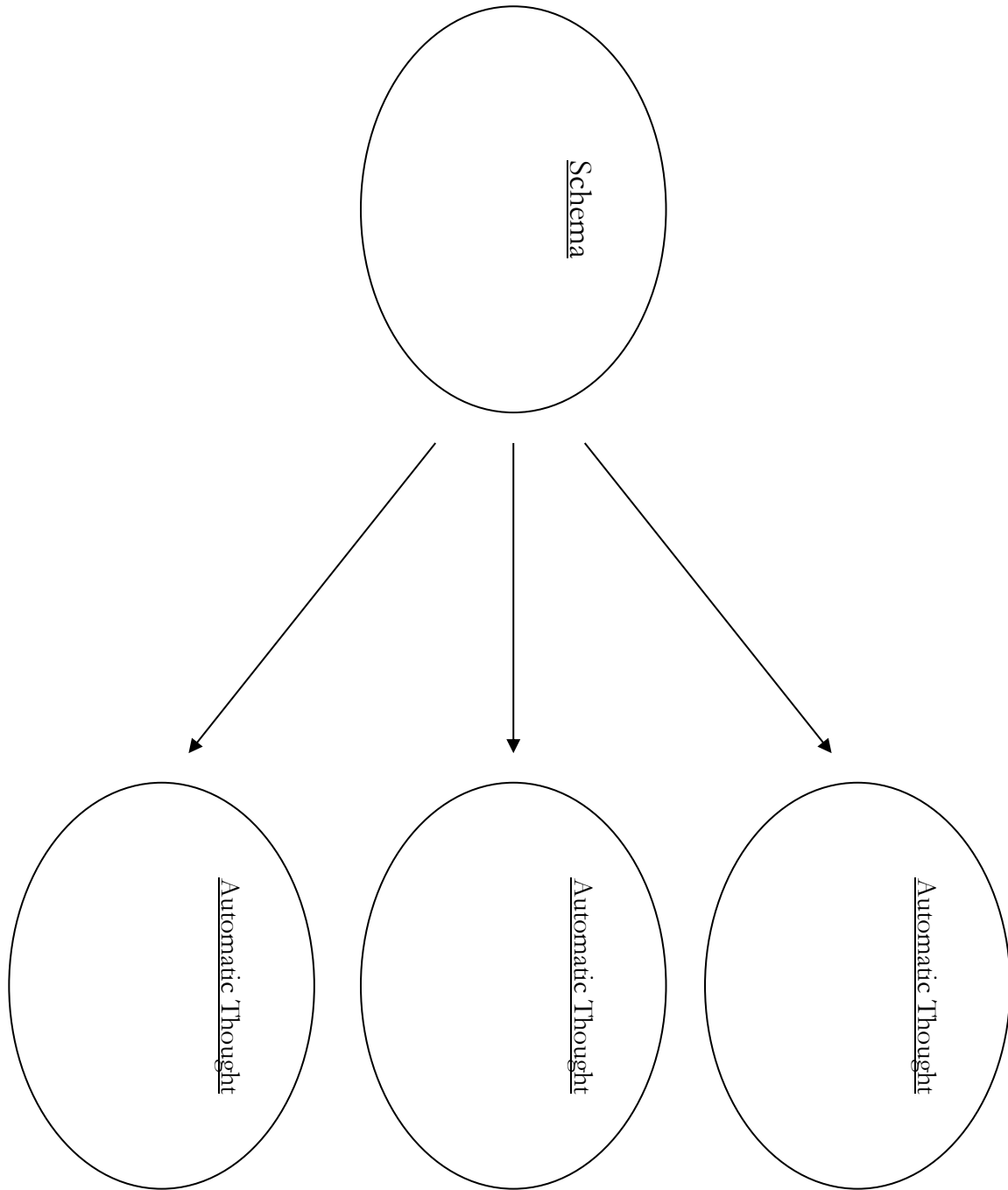
1. Please continue to use defusion techniques to practice unhooking from unhelpful thoughts
2. Listen to the first 10 minutes of each of the three mindfulness exercises on separate days
3. Continue to use the Thought Record worksheets from Session 2 to catalogue situations that trigger strong feelings for you. Continue categorizing your automatic thoughts in the final column by identifying the cognitive distortions they represent
4. Work on identifying themes within the automatic thoughts that you catalogue to develop a better understanding of the schema you use to selectively attend to your daily experience. See the Schema Diagram
5. Practice using defusion techniques to unhook from unhelpful schema that you have identified

#### **ALSO:**

- Continue to practice abdominal breathing to help manage your stress response

- Please remember to complete any group homework exercises you have been assigned from the group therapy portion of the program

### Schema Diagram<sup>3</sup>



## Schema Inventory<sup>3</sup>

**Instructions:** Use this checklist to search for possible underlying rules of thinking. Place a check mark beside each schema that you think you may have.

Healthy Schemas	Unhelpful Schemas
<input type="checkbox"/> No matter what happens, I can manage.	<input type="checkbox"/> I must be perfect to be accepted.
<input type="checkbox"/> If I work hard at something, I can master it.	<input type="checkbox"/> If I choose to do something, I must succeed.
<input type="checkbox"/> I'm a survivor.	<input type="checkbox"/> I'm stupid.
<input type="checkbox"/> Others trust me.	<input type="checkbox"/> Without a woman (man), I'm nothing.
<input type="checkbox"/> I'm a good person.	<input type="checkbox"/> I'm a fake.
<input type="checkbox"/> People respect me.	<input type="checkbox"/> Never show weakness.
<input type="checkbox"/> I care about other people.	<input type="checkbox"/> I'm unlovable.
<input type="checkbox"/> If I prepare in advance, I can do better.	<input type="checkbox"/> I'll never be comfortable around others.
<input type="checkbox"/> I deserve to be respected.	<input type="checkbox"/> I can never finish anything.
<input type="checkbox"/> I like to be challenged.	<input type="checkbox"/> No matter what I do, I won't succeed.
<input type="checkbox"/> There's not much that can scare me.	<input type="checkbox"/> The world is too frightening for me.
<input type="checkbox"/> I'm intelligent.	<input type="checkbox"/> Others can't be trusted.
<input type="checkbox"/> I can figure things out.	<input type="checkbox"/> I must always be in control.
<input type="checkbox"/> I'm friendly.	<input type="checkbox"/> I'm unattractive.
<input type="checkbox"/> I can handle stress.	<input type="checkbox"/> Never show your emotions.
<input type="checkbox"/> I learn from my mistakes and become better.	<input type="checkbox"/> Other people will take advantage of me.
<input type="checkbox"/> I'm a good spouse/parent/child/friend/lover.	<input type="checkbox"/> I'm lazy.
<input type="checkbox"/> Everything will work out all right.	<input type="checkbox"/> If people really knew me, they wouldn't like me.

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## Appendix A: Acronyms

CBT	cognitive-behavioral therapy
SCORE	Study of Cognitive Rehabilitation Effectiveness