

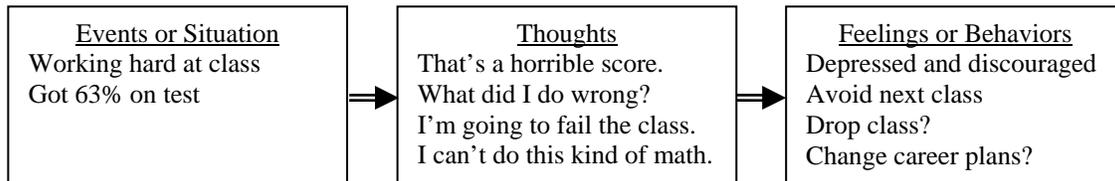
Cognitive Therapy Overview

How Thoughts Affect our Mood and Behavior

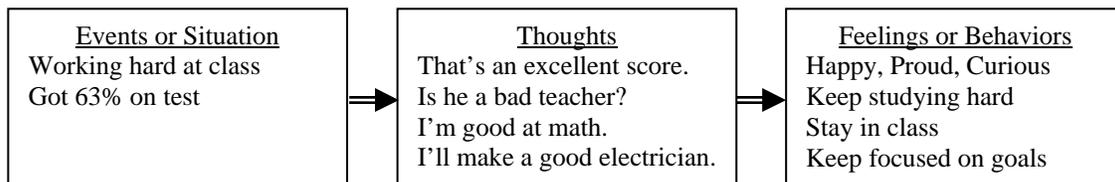
One of the assumptions of cognitive therapy is that our own thoughts cause negative mood states and unhealthy behaviors. Intuitively, most people are able to recognize that their feelings and behaviors are related to events or situations in their life. Consider the following example. Imagine a person is taking a math class and she has been working very hard at learning the lessons. She gets the first big test back and her score is 63%. She feels extremely discouraged and is depressed for the next few days. She skips the next class, considers dropping the class altogether, and even considers changing her career goals.



However, it was not the events or situation that caused the feelings and led to the actions. Instead, it was her own internal thoughts that led to the feelings and behaviors.



Now imagine that she later found out that the highest score on the test was 64% and that her grade was in the high 'A' range. She also found out that it was the instructor's first time teaching the class and that he received poor ratings when he taught a different class last semester. Even though the events or situation remains the same, her feelings and actions would be likely to change dramatically only because she would have different thoughts.



Of course that is an overly simple example (rarely are things in life that simple). And there are several other causes of negative feelings including bio-chemical changes that are outside of our control. However, in nearly all cases of depression and anxiety, at least some of the negative feelings are created by the person's thoughts. Several years of scientific research has shown that there are common thought patterns associated with different types of anxiety and depression. Luckily, the research has also shown that cognitive therapy can help people change these thought patterns and overcome the depression or anxiety.

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Basic Skills Learned During Cognitive Therapy

Cognitive therapy proceeds in three general stages of skill development:

1. Catch the negative automatic thoughts (NATs)
2. Check the thoughts for distortions
3. Change the thoughts to become more realistic and healthy

Stage 1: Catching the Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs)

When an event happens (or is about to happen), we all have thoughts about the event without even trying. These are called “automatic thoughts.” When we are feeling anxious or depressed the automatic thoughts can become biased towards negative outcomes or evaluations. One of the first steps of cognitive therapy is catching Negative Automatic Thoughts (or NATs for short). And just like the bugs called gnats, individually they are mildly annoying and easy to ignore, but when there is a swarm of them, they can wear you down and really foul your mood. To get better at catching these thoughts, the therapist may ask you to keep a thought record. Typically, a thought record includes columns for events, your mood or feelings, and your thoughts. It is especially important to record events and thoughts related to feelings of depression or anxiety.

Stage 2: Checking the Thoughts for Distortions

Once you begin to recognize the thoughts associated with your feelings, the next step is to check how accurate and realistic the thoughts really are. We often don't do this step on our own because the thoughts occur so quickly and because we just assume our thoughts are accurate. However, in every case of depression or anxiety that I ever encountered, I have been able to help the client identify faulty thought patterns. Cognitive therapists usually refer to these unhealthy thought patterns as “cognitive distortions” or “irrational beliefs.” To get better at checking your thoughts, you should read the summary of “Common Irrational, Distorted, and Pessimistic Thought Patterns” to see which examples sound familiar to you. Early on, your therapist will help you identify these distortions until you become more skilled at checking the thoughts on your own.

Step 3: Challenging or Changing the Thoughts

During this step, you learn how to replace the negative automatic thoughts with more healthy and realistic thoughts. Usually, this is the task that clients need most help with from the therapist. Some specific techniques that you can use include rewording the thought (semantic technique), weighing the evidence to support or refute the thought, and considering how a mentor or your therapist would respond. Often times your therapist will encourage you to write down the NAT's, cognitive distortions, and healthy thoughts in a triple column form. Writing down your efforts at this point is especially important because this stage of cognitive therapy will take a lot of practice for you to master the skills and internalize a new way of thinking.

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