

HANDOUT 3: Identifying and Challenging Unhelpful Thinking Associated With Toilet Anxiety

This handout provides a brief introduction to identifying and challenging the unhelpful thoughts that precede and maintain toilet anxiety.

The relationship between events and feelings:

- Generally people assume that an event has a direct effect on their feelings, which are the consequence of the event
- However, it is not only an event, such as an embarrassing situation in a public toilet, that makes us feel anxious; it is also the way that we think about and process the embarrassing situation
- An event is a situation that we react to – for example, using a busy public bathroom. A consequence is the way you respond to your thoughts, which consists of feelings and behaviour
- Some thoughts occur automatically following an event – these are known as automatic thoughts, of which there are 3 types:
 1. Neutral thoughts, which make no evaluation of an event and have no emotional association eg. “my keys are on the bench”
 2. Positive thoughts, which increase the likelihood that you will be able to reach the goal you have set for yourself, or feel good. Positive thoughts need to be logical and realistic, and could go along the lines of “Even though I’m feeling really anxious about going to this meeting, I’m going to give it a go”
 3. Unhelpful thoughts are self-critical thoughts that can prevent you from achieving your goals by reducing your self-confidence before you have even attempt anything. For example, “The meeting is going to be stressful so I’m just going to stay home”

When do automatic thoughts become a problem?

- Thinking habits only become a problem if you find yourself frequently feeling down or easily upset and your feelings are interfering with your ability to effectively handle every day or major stresses
- Automatic thoughts can become a problem if they prevent you from learning or trying alternative ways of coping with stress. People who think “It’s no use”, “I’ll never get them to accept my idea”, or, “I can’t do anything about this”, prevent themselves from exploring alternatives
- You might have some regular unhelpful thoughts of your own, such as: “I’m hopeless”, “Nobody could be as unhappy as I am” or “I can’t cope, it’s all too much”
- Unhelpful thoughts or thinking errors (also called negative thoughts, mistaken beliefs) like these have several characteristics. They are:
 - Automatic – they just spring to mind
 - Distorted – they do not fit all the facts or align with reality
 - Unhelpful – they keep you feeling depressed and unable to change things
 - Involuntary – you do not choose to have them and they are hard to shake

Where do these unhelpful thoughts come from?

- Unhelpful thoughts often trap you in a vicious cycle, whereby the more unhelpful thoughts you have, the more anxious you feel, and the more anxious you are, the more unhelpful thoughts you have. The main goal is to break out of this cycle
- Unhelpful thoughts are based on our genetic tendencies and experiences
- Genetic predispositions, such as the tendency to feel anxious, or being introverted, etc. are in part influenced by the genes passed to us by our parents. While we cannot change our genetics, we can recognize our behaviours and challenge our thoughts
- Significant events in our life such as our first relationship and first breakup, the passing away of loved ones and health-related problems, all impact on both how we think as well as how we behave
- Our caregivers influence how we learn to cope with stress, as we learn from both seeing and often copying those individuals who play significant roles in our life, such as parents or primary caregivers
- Core beliefs underpin all unhelpful thoughts; our core beliefs act as a filter, from which we view our lives and everything in our world
- Before we start to challenge our unhelpful thoughts, we need to better understand what drives them. That is what causes them. A good way to do this is ask yourself when you have an unhelpful thought “What does this say about me?”

Overcoming unhelpful thoughts:

- The first step to overcoming your unhelpful thoughts is to become aware of which thoughts are unhelpful and how those thoughts make you feel. Find your 'top hits', or which thoughts occur most regularly and make you feel the most anxious (see **List of common unhelpful thoughts**)
- On the following page is a table of the different types of unhelpful thoughts and examples. Take time to identify which ones you are prone to and remember; everyone has unhelpful thoughts, those with anxiety believe in them

Identifying unhelpful thoughts:

It is best to identify unhelpful thoughts as soon as they occur. When this happens, record:

- 1) The date.
- 2) The situation – what were you doing when you started to feel bad?
- 3) The emotions you felt, and rate each emotion out of 10 for intensity.
- 4) The automatic thoughts you were thinking – try to record these word for word.

If you are struggling to identify any emotions, try to determine the meaning of the situation – what does it tell you about yourself?

Finding answers to unhelpful thoughts:

There are four main questions you can use to help you find answers to your unhelpful thoughts:

- 1) *What is the evidence?* Do the facts of the situation back up what you think, or do they contradict it?
- 2) *What alternative views are there?* There are many different ways to look at any experience. How else could you interpret what has happened?
- 3) *What is the effect of thinking the way you do?* How does it influence how you feel and what you do? What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking this way?
- 4) *What thinking errors are you making?* Are you jumping to conclusions or assuming you know how others feel?

List of common unhelpful thoughts:

| Unhelpful thought | Description |
|---------------------|--|
| Filtering | Attending to the negative details while ignoring all positive aspects, eg. 'They do not really care about me'. |
| Polarised thinking | Failing to see the middle ground of a situation, seeing everything as black and white. For example: 'I'm no good at anything', 'If I don't pass, I'm nothing'. |
| Overgeneralisation | Coming to a conclusion based on a single incident. If something bad occurs, you expect it to recur. For example: 'I was sick this morning, now my whole day is ruined'. |
| Mind reading | Assuming you are aware of what others are thinking and feeling, especially towards you. For example: 'They won't like me because I didn't say hello'. |
| Fortune telling | Feeling convinced that anticipation that things will turn out badly has established that they will. For example, after many visits to different doctors you think 'If I've seen this many doctors, there must definitely be something seriously wrong with me'. |
| Catastrophising | Expecting disaster, and thinking of the worst possible "what-if?" situations. For example 'What if I miss the bus? I'll be late to work, won't be able to catch up and will get in trouble and maybe even fired'. |
| Personalisation | Assuming that everything that occurs is a reaction to you and constantly comparing yourself to others. For example 'I always bring bad luck' or 'Why me, why is it that I have anxiety and others don't, what is wrong with me' or 'They don't really mean it, they're just being nice'. |
| Control fallacies | Externally controlled – seeing yourself as helpless. Internally controlled – you feel personally responsible for everything around you. |
| Fallacy of fairness | You feel resentful because you think you know what's fair but other people don't agree with you. For example 'They just won't agree with me, why don't they see it as fair'. |
| Shoulds | You have strict expectations about how you and others 'should' act, leading you to feel angry or guilty when these are violated. For example 'I should have been nicer', 'I should be coping better', 'They should know what's wrong with me'. |
| Emotional reasoning | You believe that what you feel must be true - automatically. If you feel stupid and boring, then you must be stupid and boring. For example 'I feel like an idiot, therefore it must be true'. |
| Global labelling | Instead of describing your errors, you attach a negative label to yourself, such as 'I'm a loser'. Mislabelling involves describing an event with language that is highly coloured and emotionally loaded. |

Recording unhelpful thoughts:

- 1) *Rational response:* Write down all the responses you can think of to each unhelpful thought
- 2) *Outcome:* Go back to the original unhelpful thoughts. Now that you have answered them, how far do you believe them?
 - Do not expect your belief in the unhelpful thoughts to disappear completely in one go. They have probably been around for a long time, whereas the answers may be quite new to you. It will take time and practice to build up belief in them, and you will probably need to test them out in action
 - **Work out an action plan.** What can you do, either to change the situation for the better, or to test out the answers to your unhelpful thoughts? How would you like to handle the situation differently next time it occurs? What will you do if you find yourself thinking and feeling this way again? Try to work out a strategy you can use in the future, whenever you find yourself facing a similar difficulty

Common problems in answering unhelpful thoughts:

- *The need for practice:* Standing back, questioning, evaluating, and answering our thoughts is not a process we normally go through. This will improve with practice
- *Dealing with extreme distress:* When you are upset, it will be difficult to come up with rational alternatives. Write down the distressing thought and return to it at a later time to think of some rational alternatives
- Your record does not need to be perfect or find all the right answers

20 questions to challenge your thinking:

You can use the following 20 questions to challenge unhelpful thoughts. When you have an unhelpful thought, write down the automatic thought that has occurred and then ask yourself one of the following, recording your answer:

1. Am I confusing a thought with a fact?
2. Am I jumping to conclusions?
3. Am I assuming my view is the only one possible?
4. What is the effect of thinking the way I do?
5. What are the advantages/disadvantages of thinking this way?
6. Am I asking questions that have no answers?
7. What thinking errors am I making?
8. Am I using ultimatum words in my thinking?
9. Am I condemning myself as a person on the basis of one event?
10. Am I concentrating on my weaknesses or forgetting my strengths?
11. Am I blaming myself for something that is not my fault?
12. Am I taking things that do not relate to me personally?
13. Am I expecting myself to be perfect?
14. Am I using a double standard?
15. Am I only paying attention to the negative side of things?
16. Am I over-estimating the chances of disaster?
17. Am I exaggerating the importance of events?
18. Am I fretting about the way things 'ought' to be?
19. Am I assuming I can do nothing to change the situation?
20. Am I predicting the future instead of experimenting with it?

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If you have any questions or suggestions, please feel free to email Dr Simon Knowles: sknowles@swin.edu.au

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