

WORKSHEET

Exercise | Cognitive restructuring

Minds are amazing and help us get through our daily lives. But they are not always 100% accurate and they don't always produce helpful thoughts. Cognitive restructuring is a tool that can help with this.

For example, if you have thoughts like "I should be able to fall asleep within 10 minutes," or "I must sleep tonight or else I'll never make it through tomorrow," finding new ways of responding to thoughts might be helpful for you.

3 Things to Know

1. It is normal to have negative thoughts about sleep or any challenging situation
2. You are more likely to have negative thoughts when you are tired and struggling with sleep
3. Negative thoughts tend to cause more negative thoughts and the snowballing of negative thoughts can make it hard to fall asleep

Some examples of negative thoughts that are often not 100% accurate

- All-or-nothing – "I didn't sleep at all last night" when in fact you may have slept a couple hours. But because you didn't get a full night's sleep your thought tells you that you got none at all. That's all or nothing.
- Catastrophizing – "If I don't sleep well, I will fail my test tomorrow" is the expectation that you will not cope well with something that is less than ideal.
- Overgeneralizing – "I was sleeping okay until last night, now I'm going to fall right back into my insomnia" is overgeneralizing one bad night's sleep into an endless series of sleepless nights.
- Mental filtering – "I had a hard time falling sleep last night, what did I do wrong?" is filtering out everything you did right and the progress you've made in order to focus on one negative aspect.

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- Personalization – “I didn’t sleep well, it’s my fault for not doing X, I should have known better” is thinking that a setback reflects something about you that is fixed and unchanging or unchangeable. We often speak to ourselves in a way that is condemning, this is also called negative self-talk.
- Blaming – “He never respects my needs” is thinking that a miscommunication or a mistake by another person reflects something about them that is fixed, unchangeable or that they are doing it on purpose to hurt you.
- Unhelpful – “Even if I fall asleep right now, I will only get 4 hours of sleep” may be true given your wake time, but it is not helpful because it frames the sleep you would get as a negative and it could trigger emotional responses and worries that will continue to delay your ability to fall asleep.

How to address negative, unhelpful or inaccurate thoughts

1. Identify the thought

- It’s helpful to use moments of strong emotion to identify thoughts that are not helping you. Use a Thought Record to write down the situation you were in, the feeling that you had, the thought or thoughts you were having, and what you wanted to do or the urges that you had
- Example thought – “I will never get to sleep!”

2. Challenge the thought with an alternative

- Take another look at the situation and come up with a thought that is more likely to be accurate.
- Example Alternative – “Getting to sleep is hard for me right now” or “I am feeling afraid that I won’t ever sleep”



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3. Use your alternative thought to generate a different action

- Now that you've come to see the situation more realistically, what changes have you noticed in how you feel or what you're thinking?
- Example – "I feel less worried, now I just feel sad that I have to work on this. But I am working on it and I can review my plan to see what's next for me to try."

Some pitfalls for Cognitive Restructuring

- Cognitive restructuring can get out of control if you try to do it for every single negative thought you have during the day. Be selective. Choose those thoughts and situations that are impacting your sleep the most.
- Cognitive restructuring also isn't about "thinking positive." As you saw in the example above the alternative thought was a recognition that sleep is hard for you right now, it wasn't "I'll get to sleep no problem and rest well for the rest of my life!"
- Cognitive restructuring is not avoiding negative thoughts either. Step 1 is very important – you recognize that you're having a negative thought. You don't respond by forcing the thought out of your mind (it will just come back) or by getting angry with yourself for having negative thoughts (which is itself a negative thought and ineffective). This is another place to practice willingness. Be willing to identify your negative thoughts without banishing them and exhausting yourself. Finding an alternative is about generating a more accurate thought, even if still somewhat negative. It is not about having nothing but pleasant, happy thoughts all day, which is very unrealistic (and unhelpful!).