

Pictorial Thought Record

A visual way to understand your thoughts, feelings and choices

A traditional thought record asks you to write down a situation, your thoughts, emotions, evidence and a more balanced response. That can be useful, but sometimes words are difficult to find — particularly when you are overwhelmed, tired, anxious, dyslexic, processing a lot of information, or simply think more easily in pictures.

A Pictorial Thought Record uses drawings, symbols, colours, arrows, shapes, photographs or simple marks to help you capture what happened and understand the connection between an event, your interpretation, your feelings and what you did next.

You do not need to be good at drawing

A stick figure, cloud, emoji-style face, colour, scribble or single symbol is enough. The picture is not an artwork. It is a communication tool. You can combine pictures and words in whatever way works for you.

The basic sequence

- 1. Situation:** What happened?
- 2. Thought:** What did your mind say it meant?
- 3. Feeling:** What emotion appeared?
- 4. Body:** What did you notice physically?
- 5. Action:** What did you do or want to do?
- 6. Wider view:** Is there another way of understanding what happened?

The purpose is not to prove that your first thought was 'wrong'. It is to slow the process down enough to see the links and give yourself more than one possible interpretation or response.

How to Use Pictures Instead of Lots of Words

1. Draw the situation

Sketch the people, place or event. You might draw a phone for a difficult message, a desk for work, a door for leaving home, two stick figures for a conversation, or a clock for being late.

2. Put the thought in a bubble

Add the thought that appeared. If words are difficult, use an image: a storm cloud might represent “everything is going wrong”; a closed door might represent rejection; a magnifying glass might represent worry or overthinking.

3. Show the emotion

Use a face, colour, shape or symbol. You might use jagged lines for anger, heavy grey shading for sadness, a tight spiral for anxiety, or a blank space for numbness. Add an intensity from 0–10 if that is helpful.

4. Map the body

Draw a simple body outline and mark where you felt the emotion: tight chest, tense jaw, heavy shoulders, restless hands, nausea, heat, shaking or another sensation.

5. Show what happened next

Use an arrow to your response. Did you avoid, withdraw, argue, seek reassurance, freeze, cry, overwork, scroll, cancel something, ask for help or take a break?

6. Add another possible picture

Now draw or write another explanation. This does not have to be artificially positive. Aim for something broader and more balanced that includes information your first interpretation may have missed.

Pictorial Thought Record — Worksheet 1

1. WHAT HAPPENED? Draw the situation in this space.

2. WHAT DID MY MIND SAY? Draw a thought bubble, symbol or write a few words.

3. HOW DID I FEEL? Draw, colour or circle the emotion.

Emotion: _____ Intensity: _____ / 10

4. WHAT DID MY BODY NOTICE?

5. WHAT DID I DO NEXT?

Pictorial Thought Record — Worksheet 2

Look at your first picture again. Now widen the frame.

What information did my first thought focus on?

What information might have been outside the picture?

Draw or write another possible explanation

If somebody I cared about showed me this picture, what might I say to them?

What could I choose to do now?

How strong is the original feeling now?

Before: _____ / 10 Now: _____ / 10

A balanced thought does not have to make an emotion disappear. Even a small reduction in intensity or a little more choice can be useful.

Different Ways to Make the Record Yours

Use colours

Create your own colour language. Perhaps blue means sadness, orange means overwhelm, purple means uncertainty and green means feeling safer. There is no correct key — use what makes sense to you.

Use photographs or objects

If drawing does not suit you, you could use photographs, printed symbols, stickers, magazine images or small objects placed in sequence. The important part is being able to represent the experience.

Use one symbol repeatedly

You might develop familiar symbols for common experiences: a lightning bolt for sudden anxiety, a wall for shutdown, a tangled line for confusion, a battery for energy or a traffic light for how close you are to overload.

Keep it brief

A thought record does not have to become homework. A few marks on a page can be enough to notice a pattern. The most useful version is the one you are actually able and willing to use.

Look for patterns over time

After several records, notice what repeats. Are particular situations triggering the same interpretation? Do certain body sensations appear before you recognise the emotion? Is there a response that gives short-term relief but creates another difficulty later?

Patterns are information, not evidence of failure. Once a pattern becomes visible, you have more opportunity to experiment with different support, boundaries, interpretations or responses.

A Message From Me

Not everybody processes their experiences best through lots of writing. Sometimes a picture, colour, symbol or simple arrow can communicate something that would take a whole paragraph to explain.

If traditional worksheets have felt difficult, frustrating or inaccessible, please do not assume that means you are unable to reflect on your thoughts and feelings. The format may simply not have suited the way you process information.

Make this resource your own. Draw badly. Use colours that only make sense to you. Use one word instead of ten. Add photographs, symbols or stickers. There is no prize for making the page look tidy.

What matters is whether the record helps you notice: something happened; my mind interpreted it; my body and emotions responded; I did something next — and perhaps there is another way I can understand or respond to this experience.

That small pause between what happens and what you do next can create room for understanding, choice and change.

Space to Breathe Therapy

This resource is intended for psychoeducation and self-reflection and is not a substitute for individual mental-health assessment or treatment.