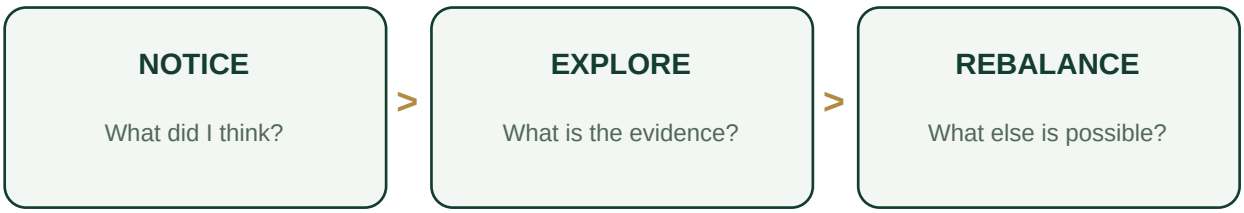
Unhelpful Thinking Habits

Recognise patterns, examine thoughts and develop more balanced perspectives

Our minds often make quick interpretations, especially during stress. Some habitual thinking patterns can increase worry, shame or discouragement. These are sometimes called cognitive distortions.

A thought can feel convincing without being the whole picture. The aim is not to force positive thinking, but to consider the evidence and make room for a more flexible perspective.

A practical thought-checking pathway



Common habits include all-or-nothing thinking, catastrophising, mind reading, overgeneralising, discounting positives, emotional reasoning and rigid “should” statements.

A quick example

Initial thought: “I made one mistake, so I am terrible at my job.”
Alternative: “I made a mistake. I can learn from it, and it does not define all my work.”

Inside this guide

1. Understand common thinking habits
2. Notice a thought and its impact
3. Identify the thinking pattern
4. Examine evidence and alternatives
5. Create a balanced-thinking plan

Worksheet 1 | Catch the Thought

Start with one recent situation. Write the words that appeared in your mind, rather than what you think you should have thought.

What happened? Keep to the facts

What exact thought went through my mind?

What feelings or body sensations followed?

How did this thought affect what I did next?

A thought is an interpretation, not necessarily a fact.

Worksheet 2 | Spot the Pattern

These are common thinking habits, not labels or diagnoses. More than one may appear at once.

All-or-nothing: “If it is not perfect, it is a failure.”

Catastrophising: “This will definitely end terribly.”

Mind reading: “They must think I am foolish.”

Overgeneralising: “This always happens to me.”

Discounting positives: “That success does not count.”

Emotional reasoning: “I feel inadequate, so I must be.”

Should statements: “I should never need help.”

Which pattern fits the thought I noticed?

What words make the thought sound absolute or certain?

Is there a kinder or more accurate way to describe it?

Worksheet 3 | Look at the Evidence

Be curious rather than argumentative. The aim is accuracy, not pretending that difficult things never happen.

Facts that support my original thought

Facts that do not support it, or that I have overlooked

What would I say to a friend in the same situation?

What is a balanced alternative thought?

A balanced thought can acknowledge genuine difficulty while avoiding an unfair conclusion.

Worksheet 4 | My Thinking Habits Plan

Choose one pattern to notice this week. You do not have to challenge every thought.

The thinking habit I want to recognise

My early clue (a word, feeling or situation)

One helpful question I can ask myself

A balanced phrase I want to practise

One small action I can take after checking the thought

Helpful questions

“What do I know for certain?” “Is there another explanation?” “Am I judging myself by a harsher standard?”

If distressing thoughts are persistent or interfere with daily life, consider discussing them with a qualified mental health professional.