



How to Make a Thought Record

By Monica Mashock

Table of Contents

Safety Warnings.....	5
Professional Supervision.....	5
Suicide Prevention Information.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Step 1: The Situation.....	7
What is happening right now?.....	7
Step 2: Your Current Mood.....	8
List your moods or feelings.....	8
Rate your moods or feelings.....	8
Step 3: Automatic Thoughts.....	11
What is an automatic thought?.....	11
Choose the most distressing automatic thought.....	11
Rate the severity of your distress.....	11
Step 4: Supporting Evidence.....	12
Why do you think this is true?.....	12
Step 5: Opposing Evidence.....	13
Why do you think this is untrue?.....	13
Step 6: Balanced Thoughts.....	15
What is a balanced thought?.....	15
Write balanced thoughts.....	15
Rate your belief in these thoughts.....	15
Step 7: Your Current Mood.....	17
List your moods or feelings.	17
Rate your moods or feelings.....	17
Step 8 (Optional): Do it Again.....	18
Resources.....	19
Resources for Finding Professional Help.....	19
Suicide Prevention Information.....	19
Appendix: Blank Thought Record.....	20
References.....	21
Style Sheet.....	22

Safety Warnings

Professional Supervision

Thought records can be completed by anyone at any time. However, they are most effective when completed with the supervision of a professional trained in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). If you are willing and able to seek professional help, please do.

Suicide Prevention Information

If you or someone you know is at risk of suicide, seek help right away. Call 911 if there is immediate risk. Otherwise, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or text the Crisis Text Line at 741741.

Introduction

A **thought record** is a short exercise taught in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Also called a thought diary, thought records have been proven to help clients overcome cognitive distortions (bad feelings caused by illogical thinking) and improve mood stability.

Some therapists use thought records as a type of homework for their clients. They are an easy exercise for teens and adults. Even toddlers benefit from identifying cognitive distortions through this exercise, and are more than capable of doing so with some guidance. Evidence shows that clients who complete thought records improve more in therapy than clients who don't.

But even if you're not in therapy, you can make a thought record to relieve anxiety, depression, or everyday stresses. After a little practice, thought records are fast, easy, and extremely effective. Let's find out how to use this simple, one-page therapy exercise to feel better.



Step 1: The Situation

As we learn about thought records, we'll follow an example client named Ben and use his situation to illustrate the process. Ben is an elderly gentleman who lives in a retirement home and doesn't get to see his family as often as he likes. His wife has passed on, and he has recently endured the death of a very close friend as well. He struggles with loneliness and depression. Ben has considered professional help, but he believes that he would be unable to truly open up to a stranger, even a therapist.

As we work, we'll use a chart to help us organize the thought record process. Now let's get started.

What is happening right now?

Begin your thought record by recording what is happening. Start with what's simple. Where are you? What is happening in your surroundings? Is something on your mind? Add this information to the first segment of your chart.

Note: Most thought records are done right away in response to bad feelings. However, you can also complete a thought record later when it is more convenient for you. Just recall your situation as well as you can.

Ben's record starts with the basic facts. It's about 3 pm, and his daughter has called to cancel the dinner they had planned for tonight.

<i>Ben's Thought Record</i>	
Situation	<i>3:12 pm, daughter calls me to cancel dinner tonight</i>

Step 2: Your Current Mood

List your moods or feelings.

Sometimes we don't immediately know how we're feeling until we ask! Take a minute to pause and ask yourself what you are feeling right now.

- You might list moods like lonely, sad, or afraid.
- You might list feelings like guilty, confused, or hopeless.
- You can list positive feelings too.
- Don't worry whether you are listing a mood or a feeling. You will be able to work with anything.
- You may want to list many things, or just one. Either is okay.
- If you're struggling to think of something, look at the feelings wheel below and see if anything fits.

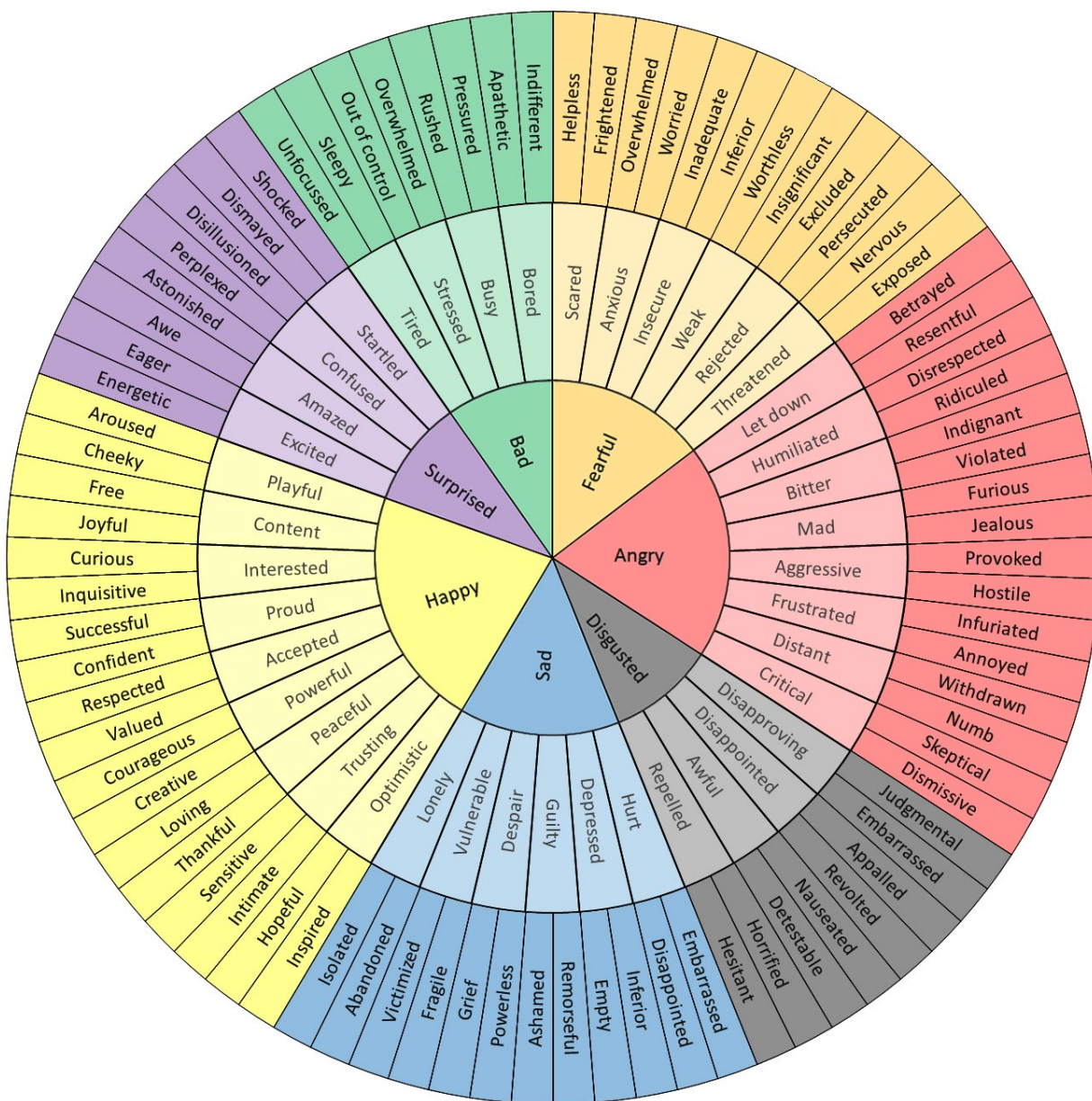
Add your moods and feelings to your chart.

Rate your moods or feelings.

Next, decide how strongly you feel each of these things. Label them each from 0-100%.

Ben decides that he is lonely and sad, and rates them at 85% and 80% intensity.

<i>Ben's Thought Record</i>	
Situation	<i>3:12 pm, daughter calls me to cancel dinner tonight</i>
Moods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>lonely, 85%</i> • <i>sad, 80%</i>



Step 3: Automatic Thoughts

What is an automatic thought?

An **automatic thought** is an idea that happens so quickly you can't control it. It's so obvious to you that it feels like a fact. Even without you realizing it, these thoughts can severely skew your attitude about a situation and affect your feelings. Automatic thoughts are usually the real reason that you're upset. The next step in a thought record is to identify the automatic thoughts that you have in this situation.

Choose the most distressing automatic thought.

Begin listing the thoughts you have about your situation. Why are you feeling upset? Did anything recently remind you of something unpleasant? You can list as many or as few thoughts as you would like. Add them to your chart.

Ben lists only two sentences. He feels alone, and he worries that his daughter no longer wants to spend time with him.

Now, as you review your automatic thoughts, pick just one. What is most intense? What provokes the worst feelings? Circle or highlight that thought in your list.

Rate the severity of your distress.

How bad does this thought make you feel? Give it a number from 0-100% and add it to your chart. Ben selects his second sentence and writes that he finds it 90% distressing.

<i>Ben's Thought Record</i>	
Situation	<i>3:12 pm, daughter calls me to cancel dinner tonight</i>
Moods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>lonely, 85%</i> <i>sad, 80%</i>
Automatic Thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I feel so alone</i> <i>My daughter doesn't want to see me anymore - 90%</i>

Step 4: Supporting Evidence



Why do you think this is true?

Step 4 of a thought record is to begin collecting evidence. In order to start feeling better, your goal is to uncover the truth of what's happening around you – not what your automatic thoughts are telling you. But for now, let's learn more about why we feel so bad. Look for evidence that your automatic thought is accurate. This probably won't take you very long.

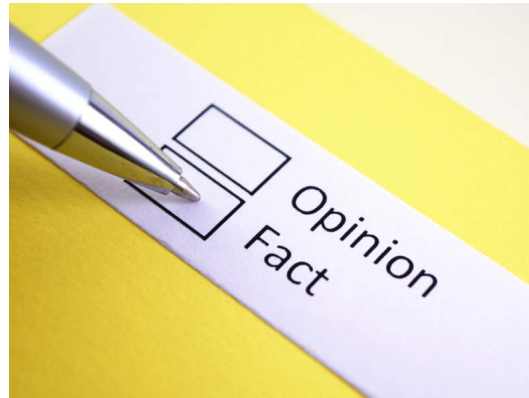
But be careful! Don't include your opinions as facts. Do not list what you felt, or how you think something might have happened. Ben wants to write that his daughter sometimes looks at him like she's disgusted by him, but he can't know what she is thinking based on her expression. This is Ben's interpretation, not evidence.

Ben has no trouble finding other evidence. He only sees his daughter once a month for dinner, and she just canceled it.

Add your evidence to your chart.

<i>Ben's Thought Record</i>	
Situation	<i>3:12 pm, daughter calls me to cancel dinner tonight</i>
Moods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>lonely, 85%</i> <i>sad, 80%</i>
Automatic Thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I feel so alone</i> <i>My daughter doesn't want to see me anymore - 90%</i>
Supporting Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Sometimes she looks at me like</i> <i>I only see my daughter once a month, at dinner</i> <i>She just canceled that</i>

Step 5: Opposing Evidence



Why do you think this is untrue?

Step 4 can feel pretty bad, but Step 5 is the real beginning of an improved mood. Now you're looking for evidence that does not support your automatic thought. This doesn't need to be evidence that directly contradicts your thought. It might just be evidence that shows that the situation is different or less severe than your thought. Compared to Step 4, this might take you quite a while.

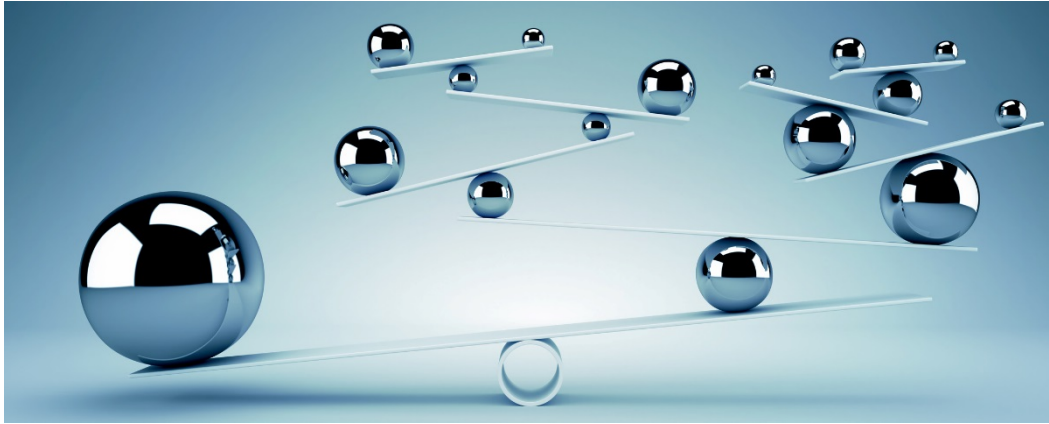
Ben is in a bad mood, so he resents this step. Don't worry if you feel the same way! Begrudgingly, he finds some evidence that doesn't support his automatic thought. First, his daughter does have a dinner scheduled with him every month, even though she had to cancel it this time. Second, she sometimes drops by to visit him as a surprise. She even brings small gifts like chocolates or a book. Third, she claims that she likes to spend time with him.

Notice that Ben does not say outright that his daughter really does want to see him. Although this is positive, it isn't evidence, and directly contradicting the automatic thought is rarely persuasive when you are feeling bad.

Think carefully to find as much evidence as you can that your automatic thought may not be true. If you are having trouble, look for evidence that your automatic thought may simply be less true than you thought. Add it to your chart.

<i>Ben's Thought Record</i>	
Situation	<i>3:12 pm, daughter calls me to cancel dinner tonight</i>
Moods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>lonely, 85%</i> <i>sad, 80%</i>
Automatic Thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I feel so alone</i> <i>My daughter doesn't want to see me anymore - 90%</i>
Supporting Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I only see my daughter once a month, at dinner</i> <i>She just canceled that</i>
Opposing Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>We schedule dinner every month and have never canceled one before</i> <i>Sometimes she visits as a surprise and brings thoughtful gifts like chocolates or a book</i> <i>She says that she likes to spend time with me and that she enjoys our dinners</i>

Step 6: Balanced Thoughts



What is a balanced thought?

A **balanced thought** is a summary of the evidence that you found in Steps 4 and 5. A balanced thought doesn't need to be the opposite of your original automatic thought. Instead, your goal in a balanced thought is to find the truth.

Consider the image above. The large marble on the left might be your emotions about a situation, while the marbles on the right might be the many small pieces of objective information you have. When you make a balanced thought, try to make sure that even though your obvious feelings might be intense, they don't outweigh the subtler facts.

Write balanced thoughts.

After completing Step 5, you're likely to be feeling a little better already. Review the lists of evidence in your chart and consider how the facts add up.

Ben compares this month's dinner cancellation to the typical visits that he receives, and he starts to feel better. He writes his balanced thought to reflect that while he does want to see his daughter more than he does, he has evidence that she wants to see him too.

Your balanced thoughts can be as short or as long as you want. Try to write the evidence-based truth.

Rate your belief in these thoughts.

How much do you believe yourself? Give it a percentage from 0-100%. It's okay if the percentage is low. You have still made progress.

Ben chooses 80%. He feels better, but he's still a little skeptical too.

<i>Ben's Thought Record</i>	
Situation	<i>3:12 pm, daughter calls me to cancel dinner tonight</i>
Moods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>lonely, 85%</i> <i>sad, 80%</i>
Automatic Thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I feel so alone</i> <i>My daughter doesn't want to see me anymore - 90%</i>
Supporting Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I only see my daughter once a month, at dinner</i> <i>She just canceled that</i>
Opposing Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>We schedule dinner every month and have never canceled one before</i> <i>Sometimes she visits as a surprise and brings thoughtful gifts like chocolates or a book</i> <i>She says that she likes to spend time with me and that she enjoys our dinners</i>
Balanced Thoughts	<i>Although I wish I saw my daughter more, her actions show that she still wants to see me too - 80%</i>

Step 7: Your Current Mood

List your moods or feelings.

Now we return and re-evaluate how we're feeling. You may want to list the same moods or feelings that you did before, or you may want to start over completely. You may even find some positive moods or feelings to add to your list.

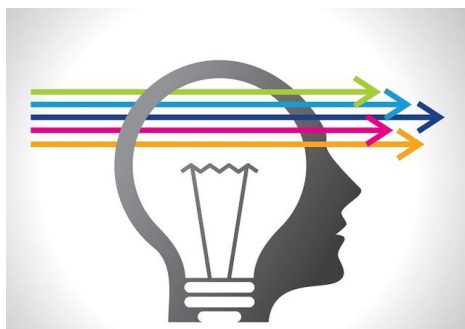
Rate your moods or feelings.

Are some of your moods or feelings gone? If you have some of the same ones, do they feel less severe? Have new ones arisen? Give them a rating from 0-100%. Are you feeling better?

Ben reduces his loneliness and sadness to 50% and 15%. Although he still misses his daughter and wishes their dinner hadn't been canceled, he is no longer feeling so personally rejected, and his sadness has mostly eased up. He also adds that he is feeling slightly embarrassed that he was so upset.

<i>Ben's Thought Record</i>	
Situation	<i>3:12 pm, daughter calls me to cancel dinner tonight</i>
Moods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>lonely, 85%</i> <i>sad, 80%</i>
Automatic Thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I feel so alone</i> <i>My daughter doesn't want to see me anymore - 90%</i>
Supporting Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I only see my daughter once a month, at dinner</i> <i>She just canceled that</i>
Opposing Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>We schedule dinner every month and have never canceled one before</i> <i>Sometimes she visits as a surprise and brings thoughtful gifts like chocolates or a book</i> <i>She says that she likes to spend time with me and that she enjoys our dinners</i>
Balanced Thoughts	<i>Although I wish I saw my daughter more, her actions show that she still wants to see me too - 80%</i>
Current Moods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>lonely, 50%</i> <i>sad, 15%</i> <i>embarrassed, 15%</i>

Step 8 (Optional): Do it Again



If you are happy with how you feel now, great! If you're not yet happy with how much your mood has improved, you can consider doing another thought record right away. Your feelings and ideas will have shifted after the first one even if you weren't satisfied with your emotional state when you finished.

Congratulations on completing your thought record to care for yourself and feel better. Consider doing more thought records in the future. Practice makes this exercise faster, easier, and more effective.

Soon you will find that a thought record is usually enough to return you to a calm mood. Over time, you will correct the same cognitive distortions over and over, until they occur less and less. You will learn that you have more power over your feelings than you thought you did, and you will move forward in life with renewed balance and perspective.

Resources

Resources for Finding Professional Help

- Consider asking a trusted doctor or a close friend for a referral.
- Use a search engine! There are likely to be many cognitive behavioral therapy providers close to you. Be sure to call for an interview first so that you can find a therapist you are comfortable with.
- The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) has thorough guidelines to help you choose a qualified CBT Professional as well as tips for how to get the most out of therapy. Although ABCT is not a certifying organization, it holds a list of all ABCT members by state.
www.abct.org
- The American Board of Professional Psychology also maintains a list of members at
www.abpp.org.

If cost is a concern, tell your potential therapist! Many therapists charge on a sliding scale and you may be able to negotiate lower rates. You can also consider calling a nearby university or certifying agency to ask about low-cost help or financial aid.

Suicide Prevention Information

If you or someone you know is at risk of suicide, seek help right away. Call 911 if there is immediate risk. Otherwise, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or text the Crisis Text Line at 741741.

Appendix: Blank Thought Record

Thought Record	
Situation	
Moods	
Automatic Thoughts	
Supporting Evidence	
Opposing Evidence	
Balanced Thoughts	
Current Moods	

References

- Greenberger, Dennis, and Christine A. Padesky. *Mind over Mood: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think*. 2016.
- Raja, Sheela. *Overcoming Trauma and PTSD: a Workbook Integrating Skills from ACT, DBT, and CBT*. New Harbinger, 2013.
- Tolin, David F. *Doing CBT: a Comprehensive Guide to Working with Behaviors, Thoughts, and Emotions*. The Guilford Press, 2016.