

Managing thoughts, feelings and behaviours

Objectives

This module aims to help you to:

- Develop strategies to manage unhealthy sexual thoughts and behaviours
- Understand how common thinking errors can affect progress

Management strategies

So you have identified how your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are connected. You may have identified some thoughts or behaviours you want to manage including inappropriate sexual thoughts. We are now going to focus on strategies to manage them. For some people this will be easy, but for others it will take time, and hard work. You are not alone if you feel it is too hard to control these thoughts, fantasies and behaviours but **YOU ARE IN CONTROL** and **you can make a choice** as to how much attention you choose to give to them.

Next time you have an unhealthy thought, urge, or behaviour, you can try to use one of these to help you stop. The more you use these, the more you will learn what works more effectively for you. It may be that you need to practice them or use a combination of these to find the best way for you.

Escape route

Sometimes we need to remove ourselves from the situation in which we are fantasising. Get up, get out of that room, leave the house if you have to. Go anywhere that stops you from having that sexual fantasy. Put yourself around people so that you can't masturbate.

Active distraction

Do something that prevents you from thinking about a fantasy. This could be reading, watching TV, going for a walk or ringing a friend. Anything that takes your thoughts away from that fantasy and engages your brain.

Relaxation

Engage in a relaxation technique that works for you. This should be planned and rehearsed in advance. Techniques include, for example, guided visualisation, breathing exercises, mindfulness or yoga.

Challenging your thoughts

You can ask yourself questions to help challenge this thought e.g., it is true; what evidence do you have which proves this thought isn't true. It may be helpful to remind yourself of the consequences of engaging in the thought/fantasy or behaviour. Be firm with yourself. 'Why am I having this thought, fantasy or urge; what are the negative outcomes of engaging in this?'

'I know if I keep having this thought, I am more likely to act on this fantasy; what are the consequences if I was caught?'. Remind yourself of why you are motivated to manage these thoughts, urges, and/or behaviours. It may be helpful to have some challenges written down somewhere to remind you of them.

Fantasy replacement

Change the ending or the subject of your fantasy. For example, if you are beginning to indulge in fantasy about a child you have seen, change the child to an adult. In contrast, try a different fantasy all together which is new and exciting.... and healthy!

Fantasy blockers

Imagine someone walking in to your fantasy and catching you. This person has to be someone who you would never want to find out, like a close friend or family member. Or maybe the police. Note that this technique should not be used if you are aroused by the idea of someone finding out.

Urge surfing

Imagine your fantasy as being like a giant wave. It will build and build to a peak and then suddenly go the other way and decline in intensity. If you do not masturbate, eventually the urge to do so will go away. This happens with all urges, not just sexual urges; for example if you are craving chocolate, eventually this craving will go away. Urges never stay, they usually are at their worst for 20 minutes. Reminding yourself that it will pass can be a helpful way to stop yourself from acting on it.

Self-care

Eating well, exercising, sleeping and relaxation; all of these contribute to a happier, healthier you. If you ensure all these are in check, you will find managing sexual fantasies much easier. You can look back to the self-care module for more information.

You can look to the [self-care module](#) for more information.

Praise your success

The most important thing is to praise yourself for your success. If you are able to stop a particular fantasy, congratulate yourself. Treat yourself to something nice to eat or do something you enjoy. Stopping fantasies can be difficult, especially if you are used to having them, so you need to give yourself credit for that.

Common thinking errors

Sometimes how you think about a situation can impact on your ability to successfully address thinking patterns or behaviour. These are known as common thinking errors.

- 'All or nothing' thinking – For example I will never masturbate again to stop my attraction to children without thinking of how to manage sexual needs.
- Over-generalising – over generalising from one specific experience/situation to expectations of future experiences e.g. I couldn't stop my fantasy so I won't try again.
- Shoulds/musts – rigid expectations of what you or others should do, or of what should happen in life. This can include the things that you believe 'must' happen in order for you to be happy e.g. I have to have a sexual relationship to be happy.
- Selective filtering – only paying attention to certain types of information (typically discounting positive information) e.g. a particular person rejected me
- Jumping to conclusions – e.g. thinking this is just the way I am.
- Catastrophizing – over-reacting to perceived negative events or setbacks, e.g. a lapse results in giving up.

Read through the common thinking errors above and see if any apply to you. When you notice yourself thinking in this way, challenge the thought by asking yourself how true it is, what evidence you have to support it and whether you have any counter-evidence to suggest the thought is not based in truth. Think about how you can replace the thinking error with more realistic thoughts.

*Please return to the website and complete the **Reflection** questions at the end of this module.*