

## Understanding thoughts, feelings and behaviours

### Objectives

This module aims to help you explore and gain understanding of the following:

- The difference between thoughts, feelings and behaviours and how they influence each other
- Common thinking errors
- The link between sexual fantasies and arousal

### The link between thoughts, feelings and behaviour

Although sexual behaviour can be influenced by numerous factors, it is not outside of your control. Sexual offending is not something that just happens in the spur of moment and often appears as a cycle or pattern that can become automatic and can occur repeatedly, becoming somewhat part of a routine.

### Understanding thoughts

Thoughts include all mental activity; ideas, opinions, beliefs, values, judgements and impressions. Thoughts are the voice in our head which govern what we do. We are not always aware of our thoughts but they are always there.

Thoughts can be automatic, fleeting or more prolonged. Thought processes provide us with the capacity to reason, use logic, common sense and put ideas together. Your mind is seldom empty of thoughts; even when you are asleep your mind is active.

### Understanding feelings

Feelings are emotions and moods that often occur after thoughts and are internal reactions to things going on around and within us. Thoughts and feelings are closely linked; either one may happen first, closely followed by the other.

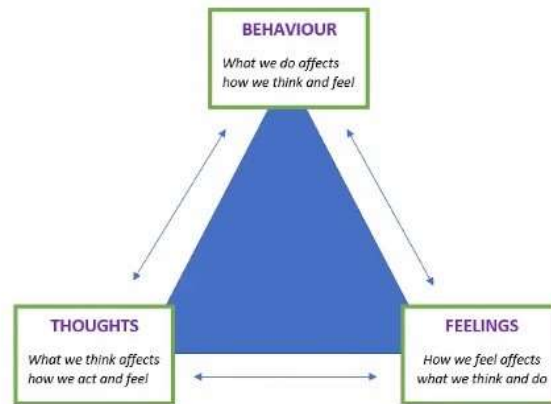
### Understanding behaviour

Behaviour is what you do; your actions as a result of what you think and feel.

Behaviour, thoughts and feelings are connected. Problematic sexual behaviour is influenced by problematic sexual thoughts and feelings, so in order to stop this behaviour, it is important to become aware of the nature of the thoughts and feelings and to manage/change them.

The diagram below demonstrates how thoughts, feelings and behaviour are connected, and interact and influence one another. Sometimes people are able to take responsibility for their behaviour but struggle to understand the thoughts and feelings that were driving the behaviour. If you have engaged in problematic behaviour, these modules can help you to explore the thoughts and feelings underpinning that behaviour.

If you are worried about your sexual thoughts, but have not acted on those thoughts, we hope these modules will help you to gain a greater understanding and put measures in place to manage them.



### Exercise 1: Unhelpful thoughts

- Think of an example of a situation that does not relate to sexual offending behaviour, e.g. going to the office party or attending a job interview.
- Identify some **unhelpful thoughts** about the situation, e.g. 'I won't know anyone there' and 'What's the point? I am not going to get the job anyway'.
- Then identify the types of feelings that are associated with these thoughts and how they will affect the way you behave in these situations. For example feeling anxious and therefore not talking to people at the party or feeling sad and coming across as unenthusiastic about the job.
- Using the same example, apply **helpful thoughts** and observe the differences in your feelings and behaviour. For example thinking 'I love parties and meeting new people', feeling excited and approaching people to talk to them or thinking 'I would be great at this job', feeling confident and talking enthusiastically about why you'd be good at the job.

You need to change the unhelpful thoughts and feelings which influence your behaviour.

### Exercise 2: Unhelpful sexual thoughts

Think about your unhelpful sexual thoughts by answering these questions:

1. How often do you have the urge to view sexual images involving children, or have sexual thoughts about children?
2. Does anything in particular trigger your urge to view sexual images involving children, or have sexual thoughts about children? For example a sight, sound, an image, a person, mood or situation, use of pornography.
3. At what time of day do they happen?
4. What feelings do you experience?
5. What do you say to yourself when you have the urge to view sexual images involving children, or have sexual thoughts about children?
6. What do you feel like doing when you have the urge to view sexual images involving children, or have sexual thoughts about children?
7. How often do you masturbate to sexual fantasies about children?
8. Do you have any other sexual thoughts that concern you?

From the answers to these questions you will have started to identify your pattern of thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Remember that sexual thoughts, whatever they are, don't determine behaviour by themselves. It is possible to manage the sexual thoughts that concern you.

## Sexual fantasy

In this section, when we are talking about 'sexual fantasy', we are referring to something that is imagined which you find sexually arousing.

### What is a sexual fantasy?

A fantasy is something we imagine. It is more than just a fleeting thought. A fantasy is usually a longer scenario we play out in our mind.

It could be thinking about a specific person, someone you know or imaginary, or even be about you in a scenario on your own. It might be about a situation that could possibly happen in the future, re-running something in your head that you have seen or that has happened to you before (e.g., fantasising about a scene in a movie or about someone you met) or something sexual that you don't think could ever realistically happen in real life (e.g., having sex with a famous person or having superhuman powers).

It is important to recognise that sexual fantasy can involve thinking about things, people or situations that would not necessarily be obviously sexual to other people.

### Why do people have fantasies?

Fantasies can be about a variety of different things and everybody will have their own reasons for engaging in a fantasy. They often fit into one of these reasons:

- For some, a fantasy will give them **confidence**, increased **self-assurance** and a **sense of control** over a situation by letting them rehearse how they will deal with a situation.
- For others, it may be a form of **stress release**(escapism) or a way to **experience things** that they wouldn't in everyday life.
- Some people use sexual fantasies to **cope with unpleasant emotions**, like loneliness or rejection.
- Inappropriate fantasies can be a way people try **to cope** and **prepare themselves** for something they fear will happen, or a way of **punishing**
- Some people use sexual fantasies as a form of **sexual outlet**; often if they are not meeting their sexual needs within a relationship.

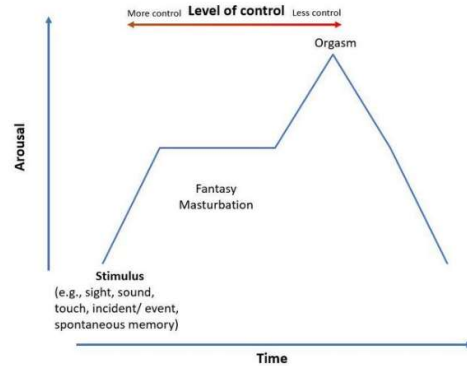
Some fantasies are planned, rehearsed and used repeatedly, especially if it is really enjoyable, sometimes a person's thoughts stray and it takes them a short time to realise they are fantasising and not doing what they are supposed to be doing.

### Fantasy and sexual arousal

A sexual fantasy can lead to a physical response in our body and/or a bodily response can trigger a sexual fantasy. Often, this bodily response is sexual arousal.

Sexual arousal can be considered as a continuum, which begins with the trigger of the arousal (a 'stimulus' that starts the arousal). This could be something external in your environment, like seeing someone you find attractive, or it could be something internal in your mind, like a spontaneous memory. Arousal increases if you act on it.

For example, if you engage in a sexual fantasy, masturbate or look at sexual images, the arousal will continue to increase until it plateaus for a while. Continuing to engage with the fantasy or sexual behaviour can lead to orgasm, followed by a decrease in arousal.



Although the initial sexual arousal may not be a reaction you can control, all along the continuum, the arousal can be controlled and interrupted – if you wish to do so – right up until the point of orgasm has begun. However, the desire and motivation to stop the process typically reduces the further along the continuum you allow yourself to progress.

### Recognising if a sexual fantasy is unhealthy

Whether a particular fantasy is considered ‘unhealthy’ can vary from person to person; for example, it is more appropriate for a 20-year-old person to have sexual fantasies about an 18-year-old, than a 60-year-old person.

There are also fantasies that strengthen attraction to children. For example, if you fantasise about having sex with your partner who is dressed in school uniform, or doing a role play of an adult/child relationship e.g. father/daughter or teacher/pupil then for someone who has a sexual interest in children, it may be unhelpful as it might reinforce the attraction or increase the desire towards children. This can be amplified if the fantasy is acted out with the partner.

### My fantasies

A good starting point in considering if your fantasies are problematic is to look at your fantasies in more detail. The next exercise will help you to start to do this by exploring your triggers to your fantasies.

### Exercise 3: Fantasy Diary

Over the next week create a fantasy diary to keep a record of your fantasies. Do not write down the content of the fantasy but consider the questions below.

Note down:

- the time of day
- your mood before you had a fantasy
- the type of fantasy (sexual or non-sexual)
- your mood after the fantasy.

Please note that this doesn’t work for everyone; some people find it arousing to keep a fantasy diary. If this happens, please stop.

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