

POSITIVE CBT EXERCISES

Welcome

It is a great pleasure to offer you this compilation of Positive CBT tools. During the past years, Positive Psychology has gained an increasing amount of attention, both from helping professionals and researchers. This attention has resulted in many valuable insights in what contributes to a happy, fulfilling life.

In addition, positive psychology has given us many tools not only to flourish, but also to cope with difficult times in life.

Since 2013, our aim with PositivePsychology.com has been to contribute to this field by disseminating the science to psychology practitioners and educators alike.

We recently received a comment to our cornerstone piece on CBT saying:

"This website gave me more direction in 15 minutes than ten years of off-and-on weekly therapy appointments did. Here I found a list of practical actions to take versus just talking about my problems. Thank you so much."

- K. Fernandez

It's feedback like this that reminds our team of why we are spending time and careers on building out this platform.

We hope that the tools presented here may inspire you too to increase your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the people around you. Please feel free to print and share this document with others.

For those who like what they see, make sure to also check out our online searchable database with all kinds of practical positive psychology tools:

https://pro.positivepsychology.com/product/positive-psychology-toolkit-yearly-new/

All the best!

Seph Fontane Pennock Hugo Alberts, Ph.D.



Rewriting Rigid Rules About Living

Mindset

② Exercise

(15 min

Client

No

Rigid beliefs about life stem from persistent, irrational demands about ourselves, others, and the world [1]. These beliefs, also known as demand thinking, are predominantly communicated in absolutist language, including words like 'must' and 'should,' and characterized by awfulizing, being unable to tolerate discomfort, and devaluing our own competency [1]. Examples of rigid beliefs include statements like, "I must succeed or else I am a failure," "Other people should respect me," and "Things ought to be as I want them to be, or I cannot cope."

These rigid beliefs and demands about life are not necessarily consistent with reality and can create myriad problems. Indeed, this dogmatic way of thinking may increase stress, rumination, and anxiety [2]; create conflict and resentment toward others [3]; and is linked to difficulty recovering from stressful events [4].

Conversely, flexible beliefs come from an awareness that many things in life are out of our control and are characterized by non-awfulizing, discomfort tolerance, and unconditional acceptance [1]. Flexible beliefs about life can help individuals adapt and cope with internal and external stressors, improve tolerance of uncertainty, increase belief in their competency, and benefit wellbeing [4]. Fortunately, with practice, people can learn to detect rigid beliefs and integrate flexible alternatives in their place.

To become less rigid in their beliefs about life, individuals can replace demands with flexible preferences that set more realistic expectations for themselves and others [1]. Simply put, rather than thinking about what must or should happen, we can think about what we would prefer to happen. To give an example, the rigid belief "I must be successful and respected" can be substituted with a preference that is flexible, realistic, and logical. For instance, "I would prefer to do well and for people to respect me, but I can tolerate it if this does not happen. I am still the same person either way." This exercise will help clients identify absolutist rigid beliefs and replace demand thinking with flexible preferences.



Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients recognize rigid 'demand' thinking and replace it with more flexible 'preference' thinking. In doing so, clients can learn to substitute absolutist automatic thoughts with rational alternatives and disengage from unrealistic expectations directed at the self and others.



Advice

- Rewriting rigid beliefs about life will not happen overnight, and clients should be encouraged to repeat the exercise whenever they notice they are using demand language that includes 'should' or 'must' statements. With practice, identifying and challenging rigid beliefs about life will become easier.
- Examples of rigid beliefs and flexible alternatives can be found in Appendix.
- It is normal to use words like must, should, and ought in certain circumstances. But this way of thinking should be addressed when it puts unreasonable pressure on clients who set unrealistic standards concerning things they cannot control.



References

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Rewriting Rigid Rules About Living

Rigid beliefs come from demands and expectations that you impose on yourself, others, and the world around you. These beliefs tend to be automatic, and you may not even be aware that you have them. So, what do rigid beliefs look like?

Do you find yourself using words like "should," "ought," or "must" when thinking about yourself, others, and your circumstances? For example, "I must be successful and respected," "Others should be kind and respectful toward me," or "Everyone should be equal and treated fairly." These are examples of rigid beliefs that make demands and set unrealistic standards for things that cannot be controlled.

Sometimes, it can be helpful to think about the things you should and should not do. For example, "I should not drink alcohol and drive my car home" is a very helpful and healthy way to think. However, "shoulds" and "musts" can also put pressure on you and others to meet certain expectations and then leave you feeling frustrated when those expectations are not met.

Fortunately, you can rewrite these rigid beliefs about life so that they are more flexible and allow you to express what you would like while acknowledging the reality that you may not get it. This exercise will help you think about your preferences rather than making rigid demands. In doing so, you can move away from unrealistic self-imposed expectations and cultivate more flexible beliefs about living.

Step 1: Identifying rigid beliefs

The first step toward forming flexible beliefs is to identify your rigid beliefs about life. Rigid beliefs tend to come from demands and expectations you have about yourself and others. They focus on the way you think things *should* be and include words like must, never, should, ought to, cannot, and should not. For example,

- I must achieve perfect results.
- I should be successful.
- Other people should show me respect.
- People ought to know better.
- I must be liked by everyone I meet.
- Other people should see things from my point of view.
- Life should not be difficult or frustrating.

Now, take some time to think about a belief you have that comes from demands or expectations about yourself, others, or the world around you. Write this rigid belief down in the space below.
Step 2: Reflecting on rigid beliefs
Before you formulate a more flexible alternative, you will first reflect on your rigid belief. Take a few moments to think about the rigid belief described in the previous step and repeat it silently to yourself so it is clear in your mind. Now, answer the following questions:
How does this rigid belief make you feel?
What demands are you making that you have no control over?

In what ways does this belief set unrealistic expectations for yourself or others?
Step 3: Replacing a rigid belief with a flexible alternative
This step is about creating a new flexible belief to replace the rigid belief detailed above. To do this, you will think about how you might change demands into flexible preferences. Thinking about what you would prefer rather than making demands allows you to move away from unrealistic expectations.
Instead of thinking about what <i>must</i> or <i>should</i> happen, think about what you would <i>prefer</i> to happen. Let's use the example, "I should be successful, and people should respect me." A more flexible alternative that considers your preferences and desires rather than demands would be: "I would prefer to be successful and respected, but no one is perfect or liked by everyone. We can't get everything we want, and demanding that from other people is unrealistic."
So, how would you prefer things to be in this situation?
I would prefer/I would like

Step 4: Reflecting on the flexible belief

Now that you have considered less rigid alternatives, it is time for you to reflect upon them. Take a moment to think about the new, flexible belief detailed in the previous step and ask yourself the following questions.
How does this flexible belief make you feel?
In what ways does this belief set more realistic expectations for yourself or others?
How does this belief give you more control in this situation?

Step 5: General reflection

- How was it to complete this exercise?
- What is the most valuable insight you gained from this exercise?
- How did it feel to think about things in terms of preferences rather than demands?
- How did it feel to set more realistic expectations for yourself or others?
- In what ways has this exercise changed the way you think about yourself, others, and the world around you?

Appendix: Examples of rigid beliefs and flexible alternatives

RIGID BELIEFS	FLEXIBLE ALTERNATIVES
I must pass this exam. If I don't, I'm a failure and it will be awful!	I would like to pass this exam, but if I don't, I'm not a failure. I make mistakes just like everyone else.
I must succeed.	I would like to do well, but it's not the end of the world if I don't.
I must be liked by my coworkers.	I would prefer to be liked by my coworkers, but they don't have to like me, and I can't demand that they do.
Other people should see things from my point of view.	I would like it if people agreed with me, but differences of opinion are a good thing. They often lead to discussion and progress.
I should know better than to make mistakes. I'm useless.	I would prefer not to make mistakes, but I'm only human. Nobody is perfect and my imperfections do not define me.
Things must be perfect, or I cannot cope.	I would like things to go well, but life is unpredictable, and I cannot control everything.
I have to get that promotion.	I would really like that promotion, but I also accept that it might not happen. I have done my best, but things are out of my control now.
Other people should respect me.	I would like to earn the respect of others, but I can't control how other people think. My value as a person does not come from others' opinions.
I must finish everything on my to-do list. If I don't, then I'm useless.	I would like to finish everything I have planned, but sometimes things just don't work out the way I hoped they would. This is not a disaster.

What Does Not Need To Change

Mindset

② Exercise

(5 min/day

Client

No

Evolution has attuned humans to notice negative stimuli more readily and remember them more vividly compared to positive ones [1]. This threat-focused negativity bias was once imperative to our early ancestors' survival. While modern humans may not face the same dangers, it still plays an important role as we look for potential threats. For instance, we become waylaid by criticism, hung up on life's unpleasantries, and consistently weigh the negative aspects of events more heavily than the positive [1].

Distortions in thinking, such as filtering and disqualifying the positive things that happen [2], can undermine much of life's richness. Indeed, we disregard or dismiss countless enjoyable aspects of everyday life as unimportant. However, becoming aware of the positive, seemingly insignificant things that happen in everyday life can deepen our understanding of what is going well and what we do not want to change in life. It takes more time and effort for positive experiences to be transferred and stored in long-term memory [3]. Therefore, it is important to pay deliberate attention to the good things that happen, regardless of how small or insignificant they may seem on the surface.

According to the broaden-and-build theory [4], momentary experiences of positive emotions help develop and strengthen the personal resources that contribute to emotional and physical well-being [4]. Beyond feeling pleasant in the immediate moment, positive emotions also increase the likelihood that people will continue to feel good in the future [5]. Recognizing and appreciating the good things in life has reduced stress and increased life satisfaction [6]. This exercise will help clients notice the positive things in everyday life and become more aware of aspects of their lives they do not want to change.

Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

This exercise aims to help clients reflect on everyday moments and experiences that they do not want to change. In doing so, clients will begin to notice and appreciate the aspects of day-to-day life they would like to continue experiencing rather than aspects that need to be changed or improved.



Advice

- Noticing what is going well in life will become easier and more habitual with practice. The more clients practice this kind of thinking, the easier it will be to continue it in the future.
- It must be emphasized that this exercise is not about ignoring or rejecting the 'negative' things that clients would like to change in favor of a falsely positive facade. Rather, it is about becoming more aware of the enjoyable things in everyday life that they want to keep happening. Experiences and difficult emotions perceived as 'negative' are simply a part of life and must still be acknowledged.
- Clients can choose to fill in the worksheet provided (Appendix) at the end of each day. However, some enjoyable moments and experiences may likely be forgotten over the day. If possible, clients should record their entries as they notice them throughout the day so that nothing is forgotten or omitted.



References

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What Does Not Need To Change

It is completely natural to find yourself thinking of the things you want to change about yourself and your life. Over a typical day, both good and bad things will happen, but because people tend to pay more attention to negative experiences, you might overlook the positive ones.

Life is not always full of amazing and spectacular events, but there are many wonderful parts to everyday life that can go unnoticed or be taken for granted. Moments like these can make you smile and feel thankful just because they are present in your life, like cuddling your partner before getting up to start your day, eating lunch in the warmth of the sun, or listening to a favorite song. These small, seemingly insignificant experiences are crying out for your attention.

This exercise will help you notice those little moments that you want to keep happening. It is important to remember that this does not mean you should ignore the 'bad' in life; rather, it is about becoming more aware of what you do not want to change.

Step 1: Identifying what does not need to change

Sometimes we fail to realize just how much pleasure we find in those small, seemingly insignificant interactions and experiences we have each day. This step is about noticing those everyday moments, interactions, and experiences you do not want to change.

As you go through your normal daily activities, pay attention to what you want to keep happening. Perhaps something will make you stop and think, "I could do this all day" or "if this isn't nice, I don't know what is." Maybe you said or did something positive for someone, or something nice was said to you. Maybe a chat with your neighbor puts a smile on your face or a kiss on the cheek from your partner before work makes you feel good. Remember, life is not always full of extraordinary happenings, so do not dismiss things because you think they are too small or insignificant.

Over the next seven days, start paying attention to those little moments you want to keep experiencing in life. In the worksheet column marked 'I do not want to change...,' write down all the moments - no matter how small - that you want to keep experiencing.

Step 2: This does not need to change because...

In this step, you will think about why you want these daily experiences to continue. Perhaps it is the way it makes you feel or allows you to connect with others. Maybe it brings you even the smallest amount of pleasure.

Take some time to reflect on each moment detailed in the previous step and think about the questions below. Write your responses in the worksheet column marked 'This does not need to change because...'.

- 1. How does this make me feel?
- 2. What positive effect does this have on my everyday life?
- 3. What is the main reason I want this to keep happening?

Step 3: How can I do more of this?

What we do and how we feel are closely related, so naturally, doing more of what we enjoy makes us feel good. Now that you know what you want to continue experiencing, it is time to consider how you might include more of these moments in your day-to-day life.

For example, you might notice that sharing a few moments with your partner before work is something you want to continue. In this case, you might think of ways to allocate ample time for this to happen each day.

Take some time to think about each of your entries on the worksheet and ask yourself, "How can I make more space for this in my life?" Write your responses on the worksheet provided in the column marked, 'Ways I can do more of this...'

Step 4: Reflection

- How did it feel to notice and become more aware of the moments you want to keep happening?
- What lessons did you learn while completing this exercise?
- Has this exercise changed how you think about your everyday experiences and interactions? If so, in what ways?

Wisdom Letter

Coping

Exercise

(20 min

Client

No

While definitions vary, most people agree that wisdom is fundamentally based on life experience rather than explicit training or instruction [1]. Indeed, every experience we have - both positive and negative - is an opportunity to reflect, learn, grow, and acquire wisdom. The wisdom gained from enduring and overcoming past struggles is a gift that can be shared with others and is beneficial to both the sharer and the recipient.

For instance, receiving wisdom from people who have overcome similar struggles can help individuals find redemptive meanings in their challenges and, in turn, enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being, and maturity [1]. While hearing the wisdom of others will not provide prescriptive answers, it can be a source of information, support, and advice that shows individuals new ways of looking at negative life experiences [1].

For the sharer, telling stories of overcoming past struggles facilitates the externalization of problems and creates an audience to increase the feelings of connection and decrease isolation [1,2]. Further, sharing one's wisdom is a compassionate act that offers hope, provides inspiration, and helps others identify their preferred ways of being [1,3].

Whereas the intricacies of a conversation may be easily forgotten, the creative process of penning wisdom letters ensures an enduring archive and concrete reference points for the recipient [1]. Writing one's story also presents opportunities for sense-making and personal growth and allows people to recognize their agency and influence on challenging life events [4,1]. This exercise will help clients compose a wisdom letter that will draw upon the knowledge and insights acquired from their efforts. When complete, this letter can be used as a resource to help others who face similar challenges.



Author

This tool was adapted from Ingram & Perlesz's (2004) Writing a Wisdom Letter exercise by Elaine Houston.



Goal

This exercise aims to help clients who have overcome adversity write a wisdom letter that will benefit others who face similar challenges. By drawing on the knowledge and insights gained from their efforts, clients can share information, provide support, and offer advice to others anonymously in an open letter.



Advice

Advice for writing wisdom letters:

- This exercise should focus on two areas: 1) being of service to others and 2) offering the wisdom gained from experience. Clients should be encouraged to write their experience as a 'success' story to help others. As clients complete this exercise, they should not worry about grammar, punctuation, or style. This exercise is not concerned with the writing abilities of the client, and focusing on these areas may undermine the letter-writing process.
- Clients must agree to participate in the process and should understand that if they consent their wisdom letter will be shared anonymously. Ask clients if they would be willing to have their letter read to others who might be experiencing something similar. Clients should also avoid including details that might make them easily identifiable, such as names and locations.
- Some clients may be somewhat unaware of the skills and strengths they accessed to get through challenging experiences. It may be helpful to revise clients' letters and discuss aspects of their success story they may have overlooked or omitted.

Advice for sharing wisdom letters:

- As more clients contribute with their letters, it may be helpful to collate them in a 'Wisdom Manual' that will provide an easily accessible and ever-growing archive of knowledge and insights.
- Wisdom letters may be particularly beneficial for clients who feel overwhelmed or struggle with the change process. When sharing completed letters with other clients, the selected letters should resonate with clients' experiences and facilitate discussion and exploration of their circumstances.
- Clients must be aware that while wisdom letters will not provide prescriptive answers, they can be a source of information, support, and advice that present new ways of looking at their problems. While no two experiences will be alike, there will likely be similarities between experiences.
- When sharing wisdom letters with clients, the practitioner should read them aloud and ask appropriate reflection questions afterward. Some examples include:
 - After hearing how the writer overcame struggles similar to your own, how do you feel?
 - What details of this letter resonate with you most?
 - What similarities do you see between your experience and that of the writer?
 - What parts of this story could be applied to your situation? How might you do this?
 - What details did you find interesting or inspirational?
 - How has this letter helped you look at your situation from a new perspective?

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Wisdom Letter

Although you might not think of yourself as wise, you have acquired hard-earned skills, strengths, and specialized knowledge from your struggles. That is where wisdom comes from - experience.

There is an expression, "If you have the knowledge, let others light their candles in it." This exercise will help you do that by composing a letter to pass on your wisdom and help others who experience similar struggles.

Your wisdom letter will recount your "old story" and your "new story" journey. In essence, your old story tells how your struggles controlled your life. Your new story is about how you endured those struggles; acquired knowledge, insight, and understanding; and grew as a result.

Sharing your story with others is kind and compassionate, and it can also be hugely beneficial to you and the people your story reaches.

Sharing your story will help others:

- Feel connected and understand that they are not alone
- Generate ideas and solutions to apply to their problems
- Recognize that others have been in similar situations and have grown from the experience
- Reflect upon and gain wisdom from their own experiences
- Find hope and inspiration

Sharing your story will help you:

- Express yourself
- Recognize the skills and strengths that helped you endure tough times
- Remember the details of your experience so that you become the author of your own life
- Help others

In this exercise, you will write a wisdom letter to allow you to share the knowledge and insights gained from your experiences. You will help others find hope, inspiration, and new ways of looking at challenging life events. This letter will remain anonymous, and no one who reads it will know it has come from you.

Step 1: Writing your wisdom letter

Now that you know more about the benefits of sharing your hard-earned wisdom, you can begin drafting your letter. Think about a past struggle or challenging life event that you have overcome.

When you have the experience clear in your mind, take some time to reflect upon your journey and use the following prompts and questions to guide you through the process. Remember, everything you write will remain anonymous, and no identifying information will be shared.

4. Using the wisdom you have gained, what advice would you give someone facing similar struggles?				

Step 2: Reflection

- What was it like to complete this exercise?
- How does it feel to know your wisdom will benefit others?
- What did you learn from completing this exercise?