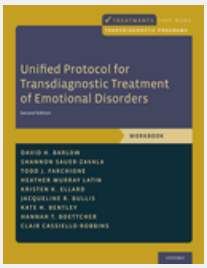

Unified Protocol for Transdiagnostic Treatment of Emotional Disorders: Workbook (2 edn)

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Cognitive Flexibility

Chapter: (p. 77) Cognitive Flexibility

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Goals

- To understand how your thoughts influence how you feel
- To identify patterns of negative thinking
- To learn how to be more flexible in your thinking

Homework Review

Did you complete your **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (and your **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotion Scales** if you've chosen to complete them) for the previous week? Have you plotted your scores on your **Progress Record**? In the last chapter, we discussed the importance of observing our emotions in a nonjudgmental and present-focused manner. You were introduced to three exercises designed to promote *Mindful Emotion Awareness:*

Meditation, Mindful Mood Induction, and *Anchoring in the Present*. You were asked to use the **Mindful Emotion Awareness Form** to record your experiences with these exercises. Have you been continuing to build your *Mindful Emotion Awareness* muscle through these exercises? Remember, this takes a lot of practice—it doesn't happen overnight. It's important to continue practicing *Mindful Emotion Awareness*, especially when you begin to notice strong emotions coming up in your life. It may be helpful to remind yourself that completing the exercises in this program is critical to your success.

(p. 78) Key Concepts

So far, you have learned to carefully track the interactions between your thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors. In the previous chapter, you learned about a skill called *Mindful Emotion Awareness*. You practiced paying attention to the three parts of your emotional response in a nonjudgmental and present-focused way. Now we move to the third floor of our house in which each room provides a coping skill that corresponds to each of the three components of an emotion—thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors. In this chapter, we zoom in on one specific (and very important) component of every emotional experience—thoughts (see Figure **8.1**).

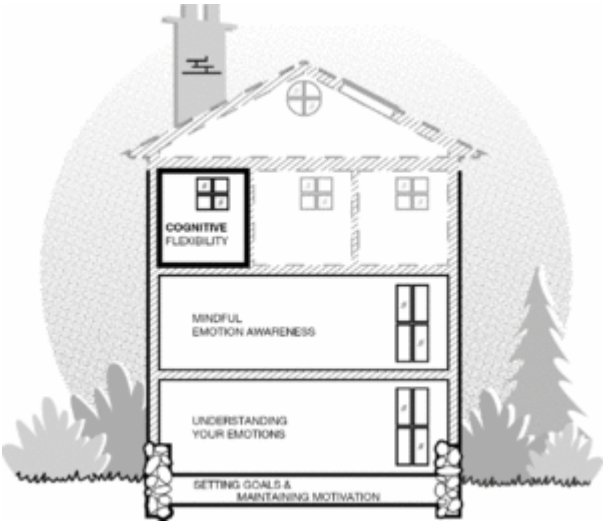

Figure 8.1

First, you will become more aware of how your thoughts influence how you feel. Then you will learn to identify when you may be automatically looking at emotional situations in negative ways. Last, you will learn how to be more flexible in your thinking, which we refer to as *Cognitive Flexibility*. This skill involves coming up with other ways of viewing situations that may be more helpful to you. *Cognitive Flexibility* will help (p. 79) you respond in helpful, adaptive ways to emotion-provoking situations. While focusing on what you think, try to use *Mindful Emotion Awareness* to observe your thoughts without judgment. This will help you get the most out of the skill discussed in this chapter.

Why Are Thoughts Important?

Thoughts are an important part of every emotional experience. This is because the way we think about our world really influences how we feel. Most situations in our lives can be interpreted in more than one way. For example, imagine that you are texting back and forth over

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the course of a day with someone new you're dating, but now you haven't heard back from them for a few hours. How might you feel if you thought, "They must not be interested in me anymore?" Perhaps you would feel sad, ashamed, or even angry. What if, instead, you thought, "They are probably distracted by work." You might feel more neutral or even excited to hear what they've been doing. As you can see from this example, *how you interpret* this situation (not hearing back from this person) really affects *how you feel*.

In addition, how you feel can influence what you think. When you're in a negative mood, you're more likely to have negative thoughts. For example, if you're feeling frustrated by a tough day at work, you might be more likely to make a negative assumption when you don't hear back from the person you're dating. On the other hand, if you had just received a promotion, you'd probably lean toward a more neutral interpretation.

Can you think of a time when you felt very anxious because you *thought* something bad was going to happen (but it didn't)? What about a time when you felt frustrated because you *thought* someone was upset with you (but they weren't)? Or do you remember a time when you felt angry because you *thought* someone had done something to hurt you on purpose (but they hadn't)? Use the following space to record an example of how your thoughts about a situation influenced how you felt about it.

_____

_____

_____

(p. 80) **What Are Automatic Thoughts?**

Another thing to keep in mind about thoughts is that they tend to come into our minds quickly and automatically. Let's try an exercise to show this point. Take a moment to look at the picture in Figure **8.2**.

Figure 8.2
Ambiguous Picture

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(p. 81) What was your *first interpretation* about what is happening in the picture? Be sure to record the first thing that jumped into your mind.

_____

_____

_____

What might have led you to your first interpretation? For example, did you focus on specific parts of the picture, like an object or the expression on someone's face? Did a specific memory or past experience influence your first interpretation?

_____

_____

_____

Try to come up with *at least three* other interpretations of what might be happening in the picture. If your first interpretation was negative, see if you can come up with a more positive one. If your first interpretation was positive, see if you can come up with something more negative. It's okay if these other interpretations don't seem as believable as your first interpretation.

_____

_____

_____

During this exercise, you may have noticed that your first interpretation came very quickly—maybe after only a few seconds. You may have also noticed that once you landed on this first impression, it was hard to come up with other possibilities of what was happening. Perhaps you focused on key parts of the picture, making it difficult to see other important details.

We all tend to interpret situations quickly and automatically. Sometimes, these *automatic thoughts* are helpful. Imagine a situation (p. 82) where there is immediate danger, like a car speeding down the street toward you. You would probably focus on only a couple key pieces of information, like how fast the car is going and how far away it is. You may not notice car's color or model. In this situation, focusing on only a couple things is helpful. It allows you respond quickly, by jumping out of the way!

However, when we tend to always focus only on the negative parts of certain situations, it isn't so helpful. Getting stuck in patterns where our automatic thoughts are usually negative is common for people with emotional disorders. Because the way we think affects how we feel, it's important to notice when we are getting stuck in negative thinking patterns.

What Are Thinking Traps?

When we find ourselves stuck in these mental ruts where our first impressions are usually negative, we may be falling into a *thinking trap*. To show what we mean, let's consider an example. Imagine you gave a presentation at work or in class. Later, you meet with your boss or teacher to discuss your performance. They start by praising you for doing well. Then they tell you about something you could improve on, like making better eye contact. In this situation, it

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would be helpful to focus on their critical feedback so you can improve your performance in the future. However, it would be problematic if you also ignored *all other possible thoughts* about the situation, like all the things you did well. This might lead you to feel more intense negative emotions and to have judgmental thoughts like, “I’ll never do anything right” or “There’s no point in trying.” It could also lead you to respond in unhelpful ways, like avoiding presentations in the future or sending angry emails about your boss or teacher that you regret later on.

People with emotional disorders tend to experience two types of thinking traps: *jumping to conclusions* and *thinking the worst.* These thinking traps can really get in the way of seeing other possibilities. Let’s talk some more about these traps.

Jumping to Conclusions

This thinking trap occurs when you jump to the conclusion that your automatic thought (e.g., something bad will happen, that you’re a failure) (p. 83) is true, even with little or no evidence. You may also ignore evidence to suggest a different possibility. For example, imagine someone who is having frequent panic attacks. When he begins to notice symptoms of a panic attack coming on (e.g., racing heart, shortness of breath), he becomes terrified that he will have a heart attack and die, even though this has never happened. This person is jumping to the conclusion that this negative outcome will happen. He is also focusing on only one possible outcome and missing other possibilities, like the panic attack passing quickly. He is also ignoring evidence that having a panic attack is not likely to result in a heart attack or death.

Imagine another person who is having trouble doing her usual activities because she has been feeling depressed. She knows that she “should” get up, take a shower, and leave the house. But she has been feeling so down lately, even while doing things she used to enjoy. This person may think about how she will feel terrible all day again, no matter what she does. In this case, she is jumping to the conclusion that she will have no positive (or even neutral) feelings that day. She is also ignoring other possibilities, such as the likelihood that her mood might improve if she decides to spend time with someone she cares about. This thinking trap also makes it more likely that she will stay in bed, which is likely to make her depression worse.

Jumping to conclusions can occur in the context of many different emotions. For example, thinking that a friend definitely hurt you on purpose could quickly lead to feelings of anger. Similarly, the thought that “I always screw things up” might lead you to feel ashamed and worthless.

Thinking the Worst

This thinking trap occurs when you automatically predict that the worst possible scenario is going to happen. You also think that, when it does happen, you will be unable to cope with it. Imagine someone who is worried that if she doesn’t have anything interesting to say at a party, people will reject her. She also predicts that, if she is rejected, she would find this devastating. Here, this person is assuming that the result of not having anything to say will be really bad—she will be *rejected*. She is also assuming that, if she is rejected, she will be absolutely *devastated*. This person is only focusing on one negative possibility, which makes her miss other options of what may happen. For example, other people might not reject her. She may also be ignoring evidence that she has (p. 84) been rejected before and survived. Falling into this trap would probably make this person feel more anxious and perhaps also sad. It could also make her likely to avoid talking to new people at the party or avoid going at all.

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Now consider someone else who is dreading going home for the holidays because he might encounter triggers (like a specific person or place) for distressing memories and flashbacks. This person may automatically assume that he won't be able to cope ("I won't be able to handle it" or "I'll get so down again and never feel better"). This trap would make it hard to see other possibilities of what could happen when faced with these triggers. It could also lead to unhelpful responses—like withdrawing from friends or family or using alcohol to cope with his negative feelings.

Identifying Thinking Traps

The problem with thinking traps is they make our thinking less flexible. By only seeing the negative side of a situation, we are more likely to respond in unhelpful ways—like doing something to avoid or push our feelings away. As we've discussed, this can keep us stuck in cycles of negative emotion. The first step to changing this pattern is to notice when you might be falling into a thinking trap in your daily life. Pull out the **Following Your ARC Forms** you completed previously. Examine the thoughts you recorded and see if you can identify whether any of them are falling into these traps.

Keep in mind that negative automatic thoughts can often fall into both thinking traps at the same time—jumping to conclusions *and* thinking the worst. Don't worry about figuring out whether a thought is one trap or the other. Instead, the goal is to recognize *when* you are falling into a trap. Recognizing this can prompt you to question your initial, gut interpretations.

You might feel discouraged by how often you find yourself falling into a trap. Remember to use your *Mindful Emotion Awareness* skill to look at your thinking traps in a nonjudgmental way. For example, you could remind yourself that it makes sense that you might be having a negative first impression given your past experiences. Also, your negative automatic thought may not always end up being inaccurate, but it is still (p. 85) important to get into the habit of considering other perspectives. This will help you with the next step: increasing flexibility in your thinking.

How Do We Become More Flexible in Our Thinking?

One way out of these thinking traps is to consider your negative automatic thoughts not as "truths" but as one possible interpretation. *Cognitive Flexibility* involves coming up with other interpretations of situations that bring up strong emotions for you. Learning to be more flexible in your thinking can help you respond in more helpful ways to strong emotions. When you find yourself falling into a thinking trap, ask yourself the following questions to generate other ways of thinking about emotional situations.

Questions for Negative Automatic Thoughts

Use these questions when you notice yourself falling into a thinking trap:

- Do I know for certain that _____ will happen or is true?
- What evidence do I have for and against this thought or belief?
- Could there be any other explanations?
- How much does it *feel* like _____ is true? What is a more *realistic* chance that _____ is true?
- Is my negative automatic thought driven by the intense emotions I'm experiencing?
- If _____ was true, could I cope with it? How would I handle it?

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■ Even if _____ was true, could I live with it?

These questions are designed to help you get your thinking unstuck. The responses to these questions make it easier to come up with other possible interpretations. Remember, your automatic first impressions happen very quickly, so you may also find it helpful to type these questions into your cell phone or take a picture of them so it's easier to use them in the future. Let's go through an example of what using these questions could look like. Remember the person who is concerned that if she doesn't have anything interesting to say at a party, she will be rejected. If this were to happen, she also expects that it will be devastating for her. Imagine how she might respond to some of the questions above:

(p. 86)

■ Do I know for certain that they will reject me if I don't have anything interesting to say? *No, I do not know this for certain.*

■ How much does it *feel* like they will reject me? *A lot, especially when I'm anxious.* What is a more realistic chance that they will reject me? *The chance is probably smaller than I think it is—it feels like there is 90% chance, but maybe a 40% chance is more realistic.*

■ Even if they did reject me, could I live with it? *I guess. I have been rejected before, like someone not calling me after a first date. Even though it didn't feel good at the time, I don't really think about it much now.*

Now think back to the person who was dreading going home for the holidays. His automatic thoughts were about not being able to handle it if he had to face triggers for distressing memories. This person might try asking himself:

■ What evidence do I have for and against this thought or belief? *In the past, there have been times when going home has been way too overwhelming. But this hasn't happened every single time.*

■ Is my negative thought driven by the intense emotions I'm experiencing? *Probably—I tend to have more thoughts like these when I'm very anxious.*

■ If my negative thought were true (and I became depressed again after going home), could I cope with it? *Maybe . . . I've been depressed before—sometimes I've coped better than others.* How would I handle it? *I could talk to my friends about it and make sure I keep doing things I enjoy.*

The responses to these questions can be used to help you come up with other interpretations of the emotion-producing situations you face. For example, the person going home for the holidays could think: "It's possible that it won't be as terrible as I'm imagining" and "Maybe I'll feel down for a bit after but it won't become full-blown depression." He may also come up with other thoughts about his ability to cope. For example, "Even if I do become depressed, I have helpful ways to cope—like talking to my friends and therapist." These other interpretations might help him plan ways to make his trip more manageable, such as having supportive people around and making a plan for what to do if he starts to feel unsafe. Remember, though, that the goal isn't to get rid of negative automatic thoughts. Instead, the aim is to allow many possible interpretations to exist.

(p. 87) Now try using your *Cognitive Flexibility* skill with the thinking traps you identified on your Following Your ARC Forms. Use the **Practicing Cognitive Flexibility Form** at the end of this chapter to guide you. You'll notice that the questions to ask yourself when having negative automatic thoughts are listed at the top of the form, and you can use them to come up with other

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interpretations about emotional situations. This will help you to get more perspective on your negative automatic thoughts. When asking yourself these questions, use your *Mindful Emotion Awareness* skill to pay attention to what is actually happening in the present. For example, if your first thought is “He/she is breaking up with me,” you could consider whether that person is breaking up with you *right now*. This will help you come up with interpretations that are more consistent with the present situation. A completed example of the **Practicing Cognitive Flexibility Form** can be found in Appendix B on p. 172.

While you’re practicing *Cognitive Flexibility*, keep in mind that the goal isn’t to get rid of your negative automatic thoughts. Instead, the aim is to allow other possible interpretations and thoughts to exist. Additionally, you may find that working through the questions may feel like “going through the motions” because you don’t fully believe the new thoughts you’re generating. Remember that you have had a lot of practice automatically making negative interpretations, so it will take time and repetition before the new thoughts feel true. As long as you continue to generate new interpretations that are a bit more balanced and realistic (not just the most positive thoughts you can come up with for the sake of “thinking positively”), you will start to believe the thoughts more over time.

Thoughts about Emotions

It is also important to try to be flexible in how you think about emotions. For example, people with emotional disorders often have negative automatic thoughts about the *experience of emotion*. For example, you may think “I shouldn’t feel anxious” or “I hate being sad.” Practice generating other ways of thinking about emotion, like “Anxiety can help me prepare for important things” and “Sometimes, anxiety is helpful.” The same goes for emotions like anger and sadness—helpful thoughts about these emotions could be “It makes sense I’m angry with how unfairly my boss is treating me” or “Being sad after this loss is normal; feeling this way now will help me move on later.” Coming up with other interpretations of (p. 88) what it can mean to experience a wide range of emotions will help you approach your emotions and not push them away, which is the goal of this program.

Increasing Cognitive Flexibility with Intrusive, Unwanted Thoughts

Some people have thoughts that seem to “just pop into their mind” and don’t make sense. Common examples are thoughts about harming someone they love or that some terrible but very unrealistic outcome will happen (like contracting HIV from a hand rail). If this applies to you, it can be helpful to first ask yourself: “How does having this thought make me feel? What does having this thought mean about me?” Then use the “Questions for Negative Automatic Thoughts” listed previously to come up with other interpretations about what *having these thoughts may mean about you*.

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For example, someone may think they are a “monster” or terrible person for having these intrusive and unwanted thoughts. Specifically, having an intrusive thought about their mom getting into a car accident may prompt someone to question whether this thought means they might *want* that to happen. Working on cognitive flexibility in this case could involve asking themselves whether there are any explanations other than “Because I have these thoughts, I am an awful person.” Someone with these kinds of intrusive thoughts may also ask themselves what evidence they have that they are an awful person. These questions may help them consider that they have never acted on these thoughts and that they find the whole idea of acting on these thoughts very offensive. This could help them come up with other interpretations about what these unwanted thoughts mean. For example, “Just because I have these thoughts doesn’t mean I’m a monster or I will act on them.”

What If Cognitive Flexibility Isn’t Working?

You may have noticed that questioning your automatic thoughts in certain situations isn’t working very well. You may be able to come up with other interpretations of emotional situations, but you have a hard time believing them. You may also notice that it’s especially hard to consider other perspectives when you are feeling a strong emotion. This may be because of ***core*** *automatic thoughts* that are being triggered by a particular situation.

(p. 89) *Core automatic thoughts* are *not* specific to a particular situation or event. Often these thoughts are about yourself: “I’m incompetent,” “I’m a failure,” “I’m unlovable,” “I’m bad,” “I’m worthless,” or “I’ll be alone forever.” They can also be general beliefs about the world around you: “The world is a dangerous place,” or “At the end of the day, I have no control over what happens to me.” Core automatic thoughts often hang out below the surface, like a painful bruise below your skin that isn’t easily seen. When your core automatic thoughts are activated, like someone applying pressure on your bruise, your emotions will feel much more intense. This can make it really hard to think flexibly.

For many people, it can take some digging to figure out what their core automatic thoughts are. The *Downward Arrow* strategy can help you with this. Start by picking a negative automatic thought you had during a recent emotional situation. Then ask yourself the questions on the **Downward Arrow Form** at the end of this chapter: What would happen if [automatic thought] were true?”, “What would happen next?”, and “If [automatic thought] were true, what would it mean about me?” Keep going until you get to a core automatic thought that is making your emotions more intense and getting in the way of flexible thinking. Two sample completed **Downward Arrow Forms** are shown in Appendix B on pp. 173–174.

The good news is that you can also become more flexible with core automatic thoughts by questioning them in the same way you’ve been practicing with your negative automatic thoughts. Use the questions to help you come up with a more balanced or neutral alternative to your core automatic thought. Examples could be “I’m okay,” “I’m good enough,” “I have value,” or “I am successful sometimes.” These new core thoughts shouldn’t be overly positive (e.g., “I never do anything wrong”) because it is not helpful to try to force yourself to believe thoughts that are too positive to be realistic. Keep in mind that you don’t have to limit yourself to challenging the core automatic thought you came to at the bottom of the **Downward Arrow Form**. Any thoughts generated by this exercise are fair game.

After you’ve generated some alternatives to your core automatic thoughts, begin looking for evidence that supports the new core thought each day. This can be things that happen to you or things that you do well. For example, someone with the new core thought “I’m good enough” might notice that a friend complimented them. Someone with the new core thought of

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"Sometimes I can be successful" might notice that they showered and got dressed even when they felt depressed. This is when thinking (p. 90) flexibly comes in. You will still notice negative events, but try to *also* look for positive things that could support your new core thought. You may find it helpful to write two or three things down each day.

Treatment Goal Check-In

Use the space to below to reflect on how using *Cognitive Flexibility* can bring you closer to the goals you set in Chapter 4. Also note any progress you've made toward your goals.

Summary

In this chapter, we looked more closely at one part of our emotional experiences—thoughts. We saw how our thoughts influence how we feel. We discussed how thoughts can become automatic and lead to thinking traps. Last, we learned how to question our thinking traps to come up with other ways of thinking about emotional situations. By using this *Cognitive Flexibility* skill, you will be better able to respond to your emotions in more helpful ways and without avoidance. In the next chapter, we zoom in on another very important part of our emotional experiences—behaviors.

Homework

■ Use the **Practicing Cognitive Flexibility Form** to record when you might be falling into a thinking trap and come up with other interpretations of emotional situations. Remember that the "Questions for Negative Automatic Thoughts" can be helpful in coming up with other interpretations. Try this at least once a day. If you would like more space to practice this skill, consider (p. 91) making photocopies of this form or downloading it from Appendix: Forms and Worksheets.

■ Continue monitoring your weekly experiences using the **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (as well as the **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotions Scales**, if you're using them).

■ Remember to use the **Progress Record** to record the total scores from the **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (as well as **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotions Scales)**.

■ *Optional:* If you are having trouble with *Cognitive Flexibility*, use the **Downward Arrow Form** to identify core automatic thoughts that may be making it hard to question your first automatic thoughts in some situations. Then use the **Practicing Cognitive Flexibility Form** to come up with alternative interpretations of your core automatic thoughts.

Self-Assessment Quiz

Answer each of the following by circling true (T) or false (F). Answers can be found in Appendix A.

1. Thoughts affect how we feel, but our emotions don't affect how we interpret situations.
   T F

2. We always have complete and conscious control over our automatic thoughts.
   T F

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3. In this treatment, it is not as important to figure out which of the two thinking traps (jumping to conclusions and thinking the worst) you are falling into.

T F

4. In this treatment, the goal of cognitive flexibility is to eliminate all incorrect ways of thinking.

T F

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(p. 93)

(p. 94)

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