

Lessons

Lesson 1- Story- In the Dark

Description: The influence of our beliefs

StoryTime

Myra has recently moved to a new home in a suburb far away from the city. It is a very green and pretty locality close to the woods. She has been working till late today but as she steps out of her office and checks the weather she realizes that a big storm is approaching. By the time her office bus drops her home it has become dark and the storm has gained pace. "In 5 mins I will be home", she tells herself.

As she starts walking she sees that the main street is blocked and now she has to turn right and walk through a park area with lots of trees to get home. There is a cemetery right behind the park. The wind is blowing hard. As she nears the wooden benches area, suddenly the branches of the tree right above her start to shake and some leaves and branches fall down on her. Myra shudders with fear and starts pacing towards home, her mind filled with anxious thoughts.

Story Q1

What do you think Myra believes in the moment?

- a. There was the wind blowing due to which the branch shook and caused the leaves to fall down
- b. There was a mouse living on the tree that just happened to jump across branches
- c. There was scary animal or a ghost hiding in the tree that meant to harm her
- d. Something else _____

Story Q2

What do you think really happened?

- a. There was a ghost or a scary animal in the tree
- b. There was perhaps wind blowing due to which the branch shook and caused the leaves to fall down
- c. There was a mouse living on the tree that just happened to jump across branches
- d. Something else _____

Story contd

Myra believes that something harmful is hiding in the tree and intends to harm her. But the truth is that the tree branch actually moved due to the wind and nothing else.

Story Explanation

-Beliefs

As we see in this story there is often a gap between our beliefs and the reality itself. Our beliefs can often be false or faulty and may be arising from stories we have repeatedly heard growing up, during our upbringing or due to genetics itself. Whatever the reason, they can affect the way we perceive reality which in turn affects how we think, feel and act.

In the case of Myra, since she falls for the false belief that something bad is going to happen, she interprets the moving branches and falling leaves as a bad omen. Her thoughts at that moment are "Oh there is something harmful lurking there, it will harm me, I just want to rush home and feel safe!" She is

filled with feelings of fear and starts pacing towards home. If Myra on the other hand believed that good will happen, she would have perceived the reality differently. She would have thought "It must be only a tree branch moving due to the wind, or a monkey jumping around". She would have felt calm and composed and continued to walk home in a relaxed manner as before.

-Evidence or truth based thinking

But is there a third way possible? Let's revisit the situation.

Myra is walking as the wind is blowing and the branch of the tree moves. The branch leaves fall down on her. This time she does something different. She neither avoids the situation nor falls into any of her beliefs, assumptions or interpretations. Instead she uses her flash light to check if there is an animal on the tree or is it just the breeze. She looks for evidence, trying to find the truth of the situation.

Test your understanding

Lets quickly recap the lesson:

Q1. We can choose not to be influenced by our beliefs.

- a. True
- b. False

(After the user selects any option:)

Q1 Ans Our beliefs certainly play a role in how we perceive situations as threatening or nonthreatening, good or bad. But we can choose to not be affected by them by remaining committed to truth.

Q2. What are the three ways we can respond to a situation?

- a. By trying to investigate the truth or finding evidence
- a. By following our negative beliefs like "it must be something harmful"
- b. By following our positive beliefs like "it must be only a tree branch moving"
- c. Something else _____

(After the user selects any option:)

Q2 Ans To be able to respond well to situations, our perceptions of the situations should be truth and evidence based not belief based. Positive beliefs can help temporarily in the moment by giving us confidence but in the long term only truth based responses really help us out of suffering.

Lesson summary

-The situation in itself does NOT play a role in how we think, feel or act.

--Our beliefs can influence how we perceive a situation

-When we are driven by beliefs, we may react to situations in ways that causes us misery.

Lesson 1 Exercise- Thoughts and Feelings

Theory

Now that we have understood how we respond to situations, let's go a little deeper and understand the basics a little better.

Thoughts - The internal dialogue that goes on in our minds at all times. It could be an idea or an opinion.

Example: I wish it would be cooler today.

Feelings - our emotional state at a given time.

Example: anxious, happy, sad, frustrated, etc.

Practice - Identify thoughts and feelings

Let's try to identify in the following statements whether these are thoughts or feelings

"I feel like I should have said something"

- a. Thought
- b. Feeling

Even though the statement starts with I FEEL, this is a thought! This is because it is my opinion.

Sad

- a. Thought
- b. Feeling

This is a feeling as it's an emotional state.

"I want to go away on a holiday"

- a. Thought
- b. Feeling

This is a thought as it is my idea.

"I feel stressed" Can you identify the feeling in this statement?

The feeling here is "stressed".

Highlight/ underline the thought part of this statement:

"I just feel so miserable. I feel like nothing is going my way. This is very frustrating"

What is the feeling in the above statement? _____

Frustrated

Lesson 2: Story- Light shines

Description: The truth based perspective

Story

The next day as Myra is walking to catch her bus she passes by the same tree. She stops to look at it for a second. There is bright sunlight. No sign of anything harmful there except for squirrels running around. In fact, due to the wind the tree branch is still shaking and leaves are falling down. Same situation, just like night, but she is not feeling any fear at this moment. She smiles at the innocent looking squirrels gnawing away at a wooden branch.

She reflects on this as she takes her bus. Why was she so overcome by a negative belief last night? And this was still a small incident she could ignore. But she has many other limiting beliefs that cause her much suffering. For example she believes that she will never be promoted at her job or that she will never be able to overcome her social anxiety etc.! It's been frustrating.

Story Q1

Why did Myra's belief not become powerful in the morning?

- e. There was clear evidence in bright sunlight that there was nothing harmful about the tree
- f. She had become a confident person overnight
- g. She was happy to see squirrels
- h. Something else _____

Story contd

Myra could see clearly that the tree did not have anything harmful except chirpy squirrels jumping around and the branches moving due to the breeze.

Story Q2

Do you have any beliefs that limit you in your life and affect you negatively?

Story Explanation

-Same situation, multiple perspectives

From the story we can see that Myra was able to have different perspectives when faced with the same situation twice. The first time it was dark and she was influenced by her unhelpful belief that some harm could come to her. The second time in bright sunlight she could see the truth of the situation clearly and knew that all was safe. So the good news is that our perspectives can change. We just need to learn how to keep ourselves free from falling into false assumptions, imaginations and illusions.

Test your understanding

Lets quickly recap the lesson:

Q1 text

Identify whether these responses are influenced by unhelpful beliefs or not?

1. Ishaan has to take another way if a black cat crosses the road.

- i. Truth based response
- j. Belief based response

Q1 Ans Belief based

2. Meena always checks all facts before arriving at any conclusion.

- k. Truth based response
- l. Belief based response

Q2 Ans Truth based

Lesson summary

- We can have multiple perspectives to the same situation, our perspectives can change
- When we are centered in truth, we respond to situations proactively and stay grounded and calm.
- When truth is evident, beliefs or assumptions cannot play a role in how we respond to a situation.

Lesson 3: Story- Myra's phone rings

Description: How we typically react to situations

Story

Myra and her neighbor Ria have gone to the market after finally getting free early from work one day. They have just finished a crazy deadline they were chasing and are relieved and completely stress free. They have their shopping list ready and have just got their salary for the month. They are excited and looking forward to the evening. While browsing in a store, Myra's phone rings. She sees it's from her manager!

Story Q1

What do you believe her boss is calling about?

- a. Her boss is calling her back to the office as something in the work she submitted is not okay and needs to be redone. The boss is really upset. (anxiety)
- b. Her boss is calling her for another deadline that's just been preponed! (stress)
- c. Her boss is calling her to celebrate the the completed project (neutral)
- d. Something else _____

Story Q2

Well, Myra thinks her boss is calling her because her work was not okay and now is upset. If this is Myra's thought, what do you think she would be feeling right now?

- a. Anxious and worried
- b. Scared
- c. Sad
- d. Frustrated
- e. Something else _____

Story Q3

Myra is probably feeling a mixture of all these emotions. What do you think you would do in this situation?

Story Contd

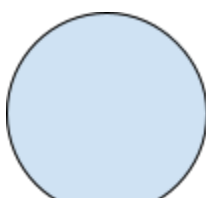
Because Myra believes it is something bad about which the boss has called, she's worried, scared and frustrated, she doesn't pick up his call. She finds it easier to text him instead. She drops a message saying she is unable to pick up the phone right now and she hopes everything is okay? She feels if he has to criticize her work it would be easier to hear it over text.

Guess what the boss responds?

"I called by mistake"

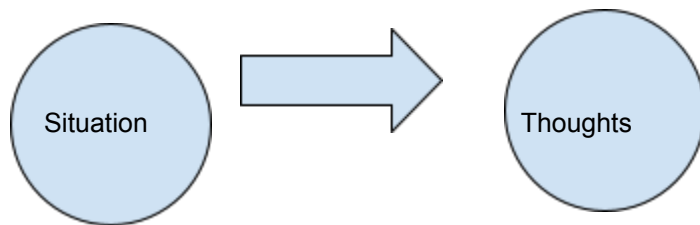
Story Explanation

In the context of the story, let's try to understand the interplay of thoughts, behaviors and feelings given a situation.

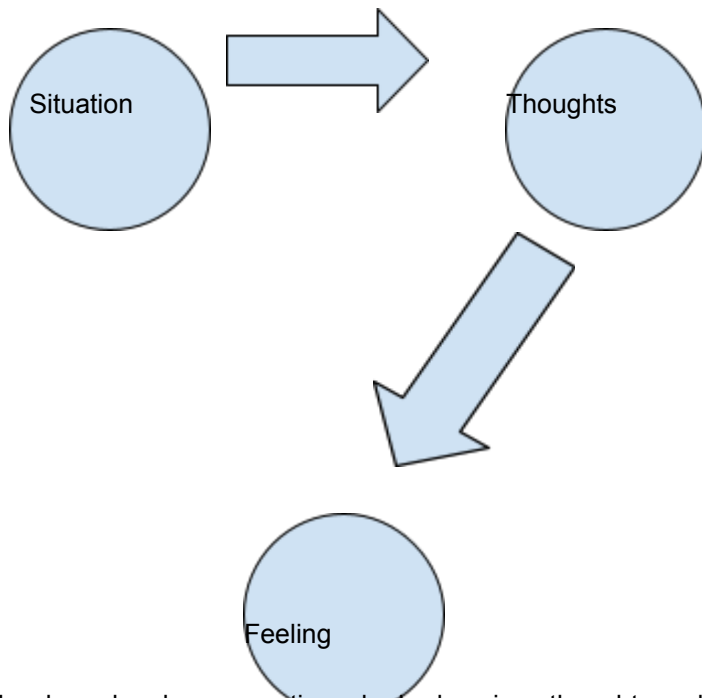


Situation

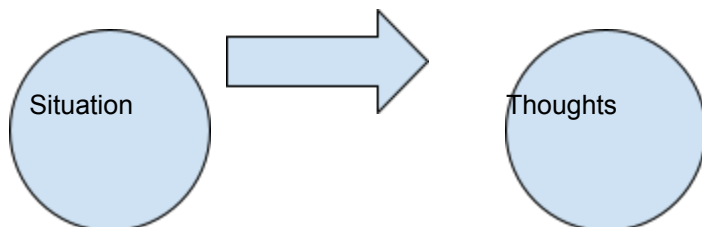
Myra got a call from her boss. This was the only thing that happened

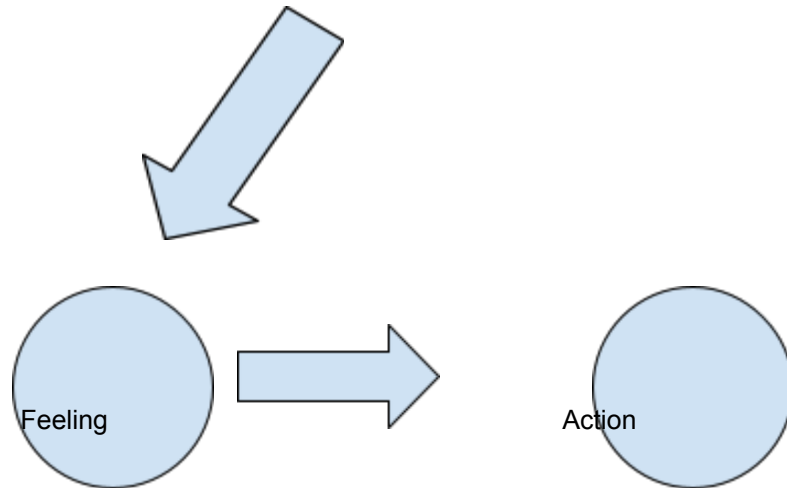


In that situation, she believed that her work was the issue and the boss would be upset.

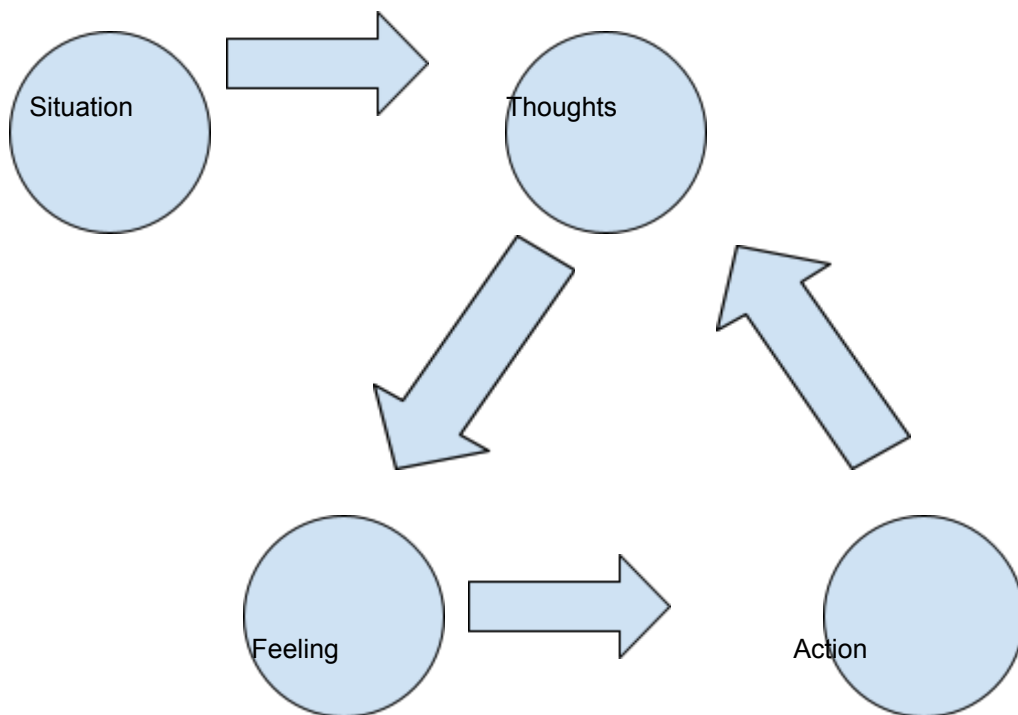


Now based on her perception, she had anxious thoughts and felt worried.





And finally, based on her thoughts and feelings, she acted by not answering the phone and texting instead.



So although this type of reactive behavior might appear to help in the short term by reducing the immediate anxiety. But in the long run, these can actually reinforce negative unhealthy patterns or cycles that may be difficult to break out of.

Experts say that our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors affect each other. When an outside situation happens and we find it challenging, we often lose our objectivity and go into a reactive mode of repetitive unhealthy thinking patterns. Such thinking patterns give rise to stressful feelings that make us even more

miserable. Finding ourselves caught in this loop of negative thoughts and feelings, we may even lose control of our behavior and start acting in ways that may be destructive to ourselves and others.

So is there anything we can do about this endless loop of irrational thoughts, feelings and destructive behaviors? Well yes.

In the last lessons we have learnt that not being influenced by our beliefs, rather finding evidence or truth in the situations and responding accordingly helps us. But how do we learn to do that? There are many techniques. We will see these through further lessons about how we can learn to recognise unhelpful patterns in our thoughts, accept them without judgment and generate more rational and evidence based thoughts and perspectives. We will also learn to work with our feelings.

Test your understanding

Lets quickly recap the lesson:

Q1 What determines our thoughts and feelings?

- a. The situation itself
- b. Our perception based on past experiences and genetics
- c. Other people
- d. Something else _____

(After user selects any option:)

Q1 Ans It is our perception which determines our thoughts and feelings and not the situation itself or other people.

Q2 What determines how we behave?

- a. Our thoughts and feelings
- b. The situation
- c. Other people
- d. Something else _____

(After user selects any option:)

Q2 Ans It is our thoughts and feelings that determine how we behave and not the situation or other people.

Q3 How can this loop be broken?

- a. By working on our irrational thought patterns
- b. By changing the situations
- c. Be working only on our behavior

(After user selects any option:)

Q3 Ans It is only by breaking irrational thought patterns that we can break this loop. Changing situations or working on our behavior would be ineffective solutions.

Summary:

- When any situation comes up, we perceive it in our own unique way.
- Our perception of the situation, and hence our thoughts, are determined by our beliefs, past experiences and genetics.
- It is NOT the situation, but our perception of it that determines how we feel and this feeling in turn impacts our behavior and the actions we take.

Exercise

Now that you are getting the idea, let us see if we can identify situations where our response is not ideal or far from how we would like it to be. Also write down the thoughts, feelings and behaviors in response to that situation. For example-

Situation	Thoughts	Feelings	Behaviors
My teacher scolded me for not finishing my assignment today.	She may be thinking I am a bad student.	I am feeling shameful	I quietly walk out of the class without talking to anyone.

This is called a Thought diary. The intention here is to develop a practice of identifying our mental patterns that give us pain and misery. Later we can learn to gain alternate perspectives and know how to respond differently.

Lesson 4: Story- Friends and family

Description: Multiple perspectives

Story

The flatmates Myra and Ria are lounging at home on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Myra is reading her book and Ria is playing video games on her laptop. All of a sudden, the doorbell rings. Ria is engrossed in her game with her headphones and doesn't hear it. Myra goes to check and it is the landlord who's come up from the ground floor!

Story Q1

What would you think at this time?

1. He has come to ask for rent/ increase the rent
2. He has come to complain about something
3. He has come to offer them some sweet dish they made today.
4. Something else _____

Story Q2

Well, Myra thinks he has come to complain as her boyfriend had come over last night. She starts to think that anyway he is so nosy, if he has found out he will scream at them.

If this is what Myra is thinking, what do you think she will be feeling?

1. Panic and anxiety
2. Relaxed
3. Angry
4. Something else _____

Myra was panicking!! She runs to Ria to tell her the landlord has come and conveys her fears. Ria, being a happy-go-lucky person, thinks differently.

Ria thinks we will see whatever he has to say. Anyways what is the worst that can happen? He is always screaming at them and is quite upset. Once more will not mean anything.

She feels calm and relaxed. She explains her point of view to Myra as well.

Myra realizes, yes!! What is the worst that can happen here? He will scream and then go away. Nothing too big or dramatic.

Well, she does calm down and feels more relaxed. And in all this time the landlord must have rung the bell 50 times! They go to finally open the door and see what he has to say. Guess what he says? He saw a boy come in yesterday and it's against the rules. He stood there and screamed at them.

Story Q3

What do you think Ria and the now relaxed Myra did?

1. Screamed back
2. Stood and heard
3. Cried
4. Something else _____

Well, they stood there and heard him. They apologized. And he went away! It was that simple.

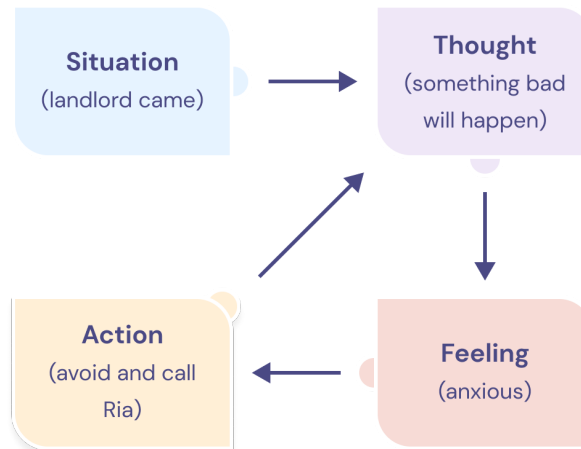
This journey we went through with both Myra and Ria tells us 2 things:

1. Our perception can be changed!
2. We need to change our thoughts and perceptions to feel differently and respond differently.

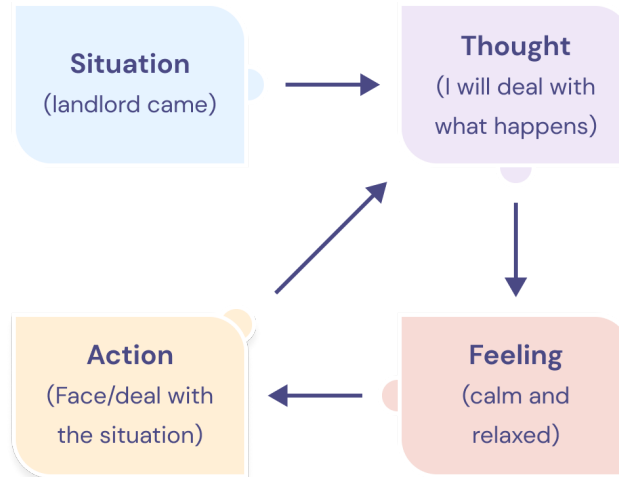
Now if Myra had opened the door without speaking to Ria, she would have been in an anxious state. She would have probably cried, tried to defend herself, and said something back to the landlord, which may have worsened the situation. However, when Ria explained the alternate perspective, she was able to calm herself down and change her feelings as well as behavior.

Story Explanation

Let's look at our diagram from the previous lesson for Myra's thought process. The situation was that the landlord came and rang the bell. Myra's thoughts went to he has found out about her boyfriend coming over and is going to get upset. She thought something bad will happen. With this thought, she felt anxious and decided to not open the door and call Ria first.



Now after speaking to Ria the diagram looks like this: The situation remains the same. The landlord rang the bell and Myra spoke to Ria. Now Myra thinks she will be able to deal with whatever happens and feels calm. Her response now is to face the situation and she goes and opens the door.



So, we see that if we can just change our way of thinking about the situation, we can change our feelings as well as our responses. There are a number of ways to change our perspective. Like in this case, if someone can explain the other perspective, that can help. But there are ways to do it by yourself too. In the further lessons, we will discuss how we can do that.

Recap/Test your understanding

Let's quickly recap the lesson:

How can we change our response to a situation?

1. By changing the situation
2. By changing our perspective
3. By talking to people

It is only by changing our perspective that we can change how we respond. Talking to people may help us, but that is just one way of bringing about this change.

Is talking to people helpful?

1. Always
2. Yes at times can help in thinking of new perspective
3. Never

Talking to people can help us in broadening our views and looking at new perspectives.

Summary

1. Multiple perspectives are possible in the same situation.
2. Our responses to situations can be changed by knowing about other possible perspectives and hence by broadening our perspective.

Lesson 5: The train of thought

Description: Breath and mindfulness

Story

After reflecting on recent incidents Myra makes a resolve that she will work towards liberating her mind. She knows her beliefs are deep rooted but her thoughts and feelings are immediately available to work with. She starts by noticing that she experiences two types of thoughts and feelings and categorizes them as positive and negative.

Like when her friend Joe praises her cooking in their recent get together, saying that she is the best chef in the world, Myra's mind has these positive wishful and exciting thoughts- "I am the best! No one can cook like me. I am at the top of the world. Nothing can beat me! In the next office picnic, I will bake my killer orange cake and it will be a winner again and then I will .." and so on.

But when her boss Ashok says this to Myra in a meeting "You are doing great Myra, just work a bit on your communication skills", she starts ruminating negatively like this- "What did he mean by that? If he wants to criticize me only then why praise me? Spoils my mood! My communication skills? Is he just using it to make me feel bad? Did I do something wrong? " and so on.

Probing deeply she realizes both these types of thoughts don't help her that much.

In fact she sees that she experiences another mental phenomenon alongside these thoughts -thinking a lot. In some situations her mind starts ruminating and just doesn't stop.

Story Q1

Myra decides to take action and thinks of timing her thoughts next time they go on for long. How many hours do you think she records?

- a. 1 hour

b. 2 hours

c. 6 hrs

d. 24 hrs

Q1 Ans

It is very common to experience ruminating thoughts to last for many hours or sometimes even days.

Story Q2

Some of us may be aware of worrying negative thoughts. But have you noticed that even when something amazing happens your thoughts go on a spree and just don't stop?

- a. Yes I tend to have both of these types of thoughts
- b. I don't think that much and don't identify with this
- c. I know that I worry a lot but never knew about how positive looking thoughts could also affect me in ways that are unhelpful to me
- d. Yes I have noticed and I really want this to stop

Q1 Ans

It is very common to experience ruminating thoughts especially when experiencing negative or positive events.

Explanation

The present moment and Positive/Negative thoughts

It may be easy to note negative and worrisome thoughts as unhelpful. They clearly do harm and we know that we don't want them. But some thoughts may seem like good thoughts or happy thoughts can also be unhelpful. For example when we are too excited and imagining about future possibilities and the mind may start ruminating around it and doesn't stop. This is an unhelpful thought pattern. Now let's try to understand why such ruminating is unhelpful. When we are thinking too much, whether they are happy thoughts or sad thoughts, our mind loses its awareness of the present moment and tends to wander in either the past or the future. Such thought patterns can only give rise to assumptions or false beliefs. It is only by being in the present moment that we can be truly aware of what is really happening and not react to the current situations.

Body and mind- Breathwork

A very effective tool available to us which connects the body and mind is breath. The moment we feel a disturbance in our mind we see that our breath gets disturbed too. Breath is directly connected with our mind. Therefore by regulation or observation of breath, we are able to gain control of our mind and get rid of problematic patterns like ruminating or negative persistent thoughts. There are many techniques we can practice using breath which form the basics of mindfulness- How we can learn to be in the truth of the present moment helping us stay calm and grounded.

1) A Concentration practice- Focusing on Breath

When our mind wavers too much whether with thoughts, there is a way to calm down the mind and bring it back to the present moment. It originates in the practice of non judgemental observation and acceptance of our thoughts as it is. Breath can be a great object to tether our mind to the present moment and by using it as a tool to ground us we are able to achieve calm and a reduction in the thought intensity and volume. This practice is a concentration practice and helps us improve clarity and focus. It also helps in settling our feelings down.

a. To start -

- Sit down in any comfortable position
- Close your eyes,
- Try to focus all of your attention towards the breath in your nostrils
- As the breath is inhaled and exhaled just simply notice the exhale and inhale
- As thoughts arise in the mind, just notice without judgment
- They can be angry thoughts, exciting thoughts, frustrating thoughts or anxious thoughts or any other kind of thoughts.
- Just let them pass bringing the focus back to the breath
- As the breath is inhaled and exhaled just simply notice the exhale and inhale
- Be in the present moment

You can practice this daily for at least 10 mins or more.

2) 4-7-8 breathing: This technique helps interlacing the mind and body

- Sit straight or lie down in a comfortable position, relax your body, open up your palms.
- Slowly Inhale while counting to 4 and then hold your breath until the count of 7 and then slowly exhale until the count of 8.
- You can practice this daily and this technique can especially be utilized whenever you start to feel overwhelmed with emotions.

3) Deep belly breathing:

- This technique helps in relaxing the mind and body. It should only be practiced when one is well rested and relaxed.
- Place one hand on your upper chest and the other hand on your belly, below the ribcage.
- Inhale slowly through the nose. The air should move into your nose and downward so that you feel your stomach rise with your other hand and fall inward (toward your spine).
- Exhale slowly. Take note of the hand on your chest, which should remain relatively still.
 - Practice for at least 5-10 mins
 - This technique can make one feel a little tired so it is recommended to practice slowly in the beginning.

Test your understanding

Lets quickly recap the lesson:

Q1 text

1. When we are ruminating or thinking too much our mind can calm down by
 - m. A concentration practice based on breath
 - n. Breathing exercises
 - o. Listening to calming music

Q1 Ans All are true but focusing on the breath is most powerful because it brings the mind back to the present moment.

2. Our beliefs may be deep rooted but we could start working on ourselves with what is readily available to us a.k.a.

- p. Our thoughts and feelings
- q. Our dreams
- r. Our plans
- s. Our breath

Q2 Ans Our thoughts and feelings can be used as immediately available tools to work on ourselves. So is the breath.

Summary:

- To become free of our deep rooted faulty beliefs we can start working with our thoughts and feelings by recognising what is helpful and unhelpful in them.
- Breath is a very powerful tool available to us to tether the mind to the present moment when we are inundated with unhelpful thoughts and overwhelming feelings.

Lesson 6: Yin and yang

Description: Identifying helpful and unhelpful thoughts and feelings

Story

Myra is sitting in her office working when her coworker passes by giving her a big smile. Myra smiles back and wonders what's going on. A few mins later her boss Ashok calls her in. As she enters his office he welcomes her and asks how things have been with her. After a brief chitchat, he tells her how much he appreciates her work and gives her the good news that she has been promoted. Myra cannot believe it! Just when she has decided to give up on her false beliefs and unhelpful mental patterns, this happens. What timing! She thought she could never get a promotion! Whenever she looked at others she always thought they were better than her. But now it is as if a miracle has happened.

Her day goes by in celebration.

Back home her resolve to work on her limiting beliefs has become even stronger. She thinks, "I will learn to break these unhelpful thinking patterns that I have been a slave of forever".

She has learnt that breath has a connection with her mind and she can use a few mins of concentration or breathing practices at any time to try to feel calm and centered. She also understands that there is power in the present moment.

Now with this newly earned insight she realizes that in reality there are only these two types of thoughts- HELPFUL and UNHELPFUL which are associated with WHOLESOME and UNWHOLESOME feelings.

Explanation

What is helpful and wholesome

Helpful thoughts are thoughts that help us stay in the present. They are wholesome, truth and evidence based, free of any distortions, beliefs or assumptions. They are associated with calm feelings like compassion or gratitude that help us respond to situations in a healthy way. When we work using helpful

thoughts and wholesome feelings, we are not reacting to a situation anymore but being grounded and proactive.

Unhelpful thoughts on the other hand can appear to be positive and hopeful like wishful thoughts, exciting thoughts, or negative and hopeless like sad thoughts or fearful thoughts. Both of these types of thoughts are associated with unwholesome feelings like those of anger, sadness, excitement or frustration.

Lets' learn how to distinguish between them by using the story examples.

Story Q1

When in the first story Myra has a tree branch fall on her in the windy night and she thinks- "Oh there is something harmful lurking there, it will harm me, I just want to rush home and feel safe!". Is this thought-

- a. Helpful?
- b. Unhelpful?

Q1 Ans This definitely was an unhelpful thought as it is based on Myra's unvalidated belief that something harmful is going to happen. It makes her feel nervous and worried.

Story Q2

Now the day she gets promoted and her fears don't have any strength, she has this thought, "I will learn to break these unhelpful thinking patterns that I have been a slave of forever". Is this thought-

- a. Helpful?
- b. Unhelpful?

Q2 Ans This is definitely a helpful thought as it causes Myra to be present, grounded and determined.

Test your understanding

Q1 txt

What are the two categories of thoughts and feelings?

Q1 Ans

There are mainly two types of thoughts and feelings- helpful and unhelpful thoughts, wholesome and unwholesome feelings. Helpful thoughts help us stay grounded in the present moment with the truth.

Q2 txt

The first step to making a change in our mental patterns is to

- a. Recognise helpful and unhelpful thoughts
- b. Recognise wholesome and unwholesome feelings
- c. Resolve to come out of false beliefs

Q2 Ans

All are true.

Summary:

1. Our thoughts can be helpful or unhelpful
2. Helpful thoughts help us be in the present moment.
3. Unhelpful thoughts take us away from the present moment, into the past or the future.

4. Helpful thoughts are evidence based and rooted in reality. They make us feel more wholesome and comfortable emotions
5. Unhelpful thoughts are based on faulty perceptions and not actual evidence. They can make us feel more unwholesome and uncomfortable emotions
6. Identifying helpful and unhelpful thoughts in ourselves can be a great starting point for building more self awareness, as well as for eventually working on our faulty thoughts and perspective.

Practice exercise- Thoughts: helpful and unhelpful

Let us look at some situations and possible thoughts to identify whether they are helpful or unhelpful

Situation 1: When we are in a market and see a friend across the street. We wave at them but they just continue walking. Here are some possible thoughts:

1. Why are they ignoring me? Are they upset with me? (Try to think about how this thought would make you feel.)
 - a. Helpful
 - b. Unhelpful

This would be an unhelpful thought as it may make us feel upset, nervous, worried, etc.

2. How dare they ignore me! That was extremely rude!
 - a. Helpful
 - b. Unhelpful

This would also be an unhelpful thought as it may make us feel angry.

3. Can you think of what a helpful thought might be here?

A helpful thought may be something like “maybe they didn’t see me. Maybe they are preoccupied with something.”

Let us look at another situation:

Situation 2: There is a big meeting at work that is typically handled by your boss, who has suddenly fallen ill and has asked you to take the lead. Here are some possible thoughts:

1. I've never done this before. I'm going to bomb it and make a fool of myself.
 - a. Helpful
 - b. Unhelpful

This is very clearly an unhelpful thoughts and would make you feel_____

Possibly it would make you feel anxious, worried and scared.

2. Why has she given me this task? She never gives me leave when I'm not well. She should figure out how to do this by herself.
 - a. Helpful
 - b. Unhelpful

This is also an unhelpful thought as it would make us angry and resentful.

3. Lets see if you can think of some helpful thoughts

Helpful thoughts may be something like "even though I've never done this before I know the work well enough to do this. I need to just focus on the task and get through it. I will ask for support from some team members."

Exercise

We have already started noticing our thoughts, feelings and behaviors corresponding to a situation in the thought diary. Now let's also identify if they are helpful or unhelpful. Think back to any recent situation, which has felt a little unwholesome to you, and see if you can identify your thoughts and feelings in the same way. Let's look at an example to start off with.

Thought Diary

Date	Situation	Thoughts	Helpful/ Unhelpful	Feelings	Wholesome/ Unwholesome	Behavior
29/04	My boss said in my performance review that I am really good at my job, my skill set is above average and I am a good team leader. But I need to improve my communication.	Does that mean I am not good enough? Is he just saying these nice things but actually meaning to criticize me? Is everyone else better than me?	unhelpful	Stress Anxious Worried	unwholesome	Getting angry at everyone at home.

29/04	<i>My boss said in my performance review that I am really good at my job, my skill set is above average and I am a good team leader. But I need to improve my communication.</i>	<i>It is great my boss gave both positive and negative feedback. Now I can work on myself to improve even more.</i>	<i>helpful</i>	<i>Calm Happy</i>	<i>wholesome</i>	<i>Calling a friend to ask for a recommended book on good communication.</i>
29/04	<i>My boss said in my performance review that I am really good at my job, my skill set is above average and I am a good team leader. But I need to improve my communication.</i>	<i>I am so excited that my boss said I am really great at my job! I can't put my feet on the ground... And he also said I am a good leader!</i>	<i>unhelpful</i>	<i>excited</i>	<i>unwholesome</i>	<i>Jumping hard with excitement and forgetting to notice the milk boiling.</i>

Now your turn. Try to think of a situation and note your thoughts, feelings and behaviors around it. Also note if the thoughts are helpful or unhelpful and the feelings are wholesome or unwholesome.

Day/ Date	Situation	Thoughts	Feelings	Helpful/ unhelpful

Great Job!

Now similarly, you can fill this table as and when some uncomfortable situations come up. It is recommended you fill this everyday with at least 1 situation in order to make it a habit.

You will have access to this table at all times *here*_____

We will also send you a reminder to fill it up everyday. Would you like a reminder? What time would you like the reminder?

Lesson 7: A twisted view

Description: A cognitive distortion: Discounting the good

Story

Post her recent promotion Ashok and Myra have started working together closely. Ashok keeps hearing from Myra about how she has slowly begun to transform her life by working on her limiting beliefs including how she had believed all this time that she could never get promoted. She is both excited about her new journey and embarrassed to share this.

Ashok on the other hand startles Myra by telling her that he has also had many such unhelpful beliefs, still does. For example, for a long time he believed that he was not a good leader. He was always very self critical and a perfectionist and never found his achievements satisfying. And even though he got frequent promotions and was popular as a colleague he never believed the successes easily.

But he has recently found a secret to looking differently and since then has been on a positive journey.

Ashok's new approach in life comes from doing deep work on himself. He believes that by keenly observing himself - how he thinks, feels and acts in different situations he is able to see some mental patterns that seem to be distortions in thinking. As if the view has been skewed.

Definition

Called Cognitive distortions, these skewed thinking patterns are nothing but extremes or biases in our thinking that don't let us see the whole truth of the situation. We see erroneously and only observe partial realities. Such patterns are very unhelpful and can lead to false beliefs.

For example- The distortion in Ashok's thinking is called Discounting the Good. Herein despite his many successes and achievements he only focuses on his failures. He continuously disregards the positive experiences and pieces of evidence he is getting and only believes in his weaknesses. Simply said in Discounting the Good we only see the bad in every situation and ignore the good.

Now, let's take a moment to think about why this is UNHELPFUL. This is unhelpful because it seems to be originating in such deep negative beliefs and thinking patterns that we are unable to acknowledge or accept a positive piece of evidence as it is. We simply reject any positive experiences.

Story questions

Q1 Do you feel you relate with this kind of distortion?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Ans 1 Hey, if you chose 'yes', you are not alone. Just like Myra and Ashok most people have at least one or more such distortions or unhelpful ways of thinking. And there are strategies to change these patterns for the better.

Helpful Strategies

Great job!

Let us now look at how we can work on the unhelpful mental pattern where we are constantly discounting the good.

I. Work on Unhelpful thinking pattern

- Take out the Thought diary and enter the situation, thoughts, feelings, behaviors
 - Identify the problematic thoughts and feelings that cause us to react
 - Recognize the ones that indicate the distortion- Discounting the good. Write these thoughts, feelings and behaviors down somewhere- for example: "I am not a good leader" or "I don't deserve the promotion". Also note how you feel in the moment like Ashok feels "shame".
 - Once we have identified the pattern that is the distortion, we can move on to the next step- finding the evidence behind those thoughts or beliefs.
-
- **Finding the truth (Where is the evidence?)**
 - Ask yourself this question- Where is the evidence that these thoughts are true?
 - "I am not a good leader" may actually just be coming from faulty understanding of what good leadership is. For example you are a Director in a technical company but unable to solve technical problems as well as you used to when you were younger. Now your current position may only require you to have good business and management skills which you may really be good at but you just unnecessarily compare yourself with your younger self or someone who is good technically and think that you should be like him or her. So now you realistically check all the good qualities you have that are needed for this particular leadership role.
 - **Developing a whole perspective- (Good AND bad)**
 - Sometimes your assumptions or beliefs may not be completely faulty and there may be some truth there. For example, the thought "I am not a good leader" may be backed up by these truths about me - "I don't communicate well" and "I am hard on people when they commit mistakes". But this may be an incomplete picture. There may be additional evidence to suggest that there are some goods in me too that I have been ignoring. For example, "Everyone voted for me as a great mentor just last week". And "I give constructive feedback". So it is only partially true that "I am not a good leader". The reality is that there is both good and bad in me or we can say room for improvement. This is how we can make a shift from an extreme perspective- "I am not a good leader" to a balanced and whole perspective- "I have some qualities of a good leader, and there is

room for improvement". Now that I have these new helpful thoughts, I can feel and act from a place of balance and be more whole and happier.

- **The challenge of negative emotions**

- Sometimes when we are feeling low it may be difficult to generate such alternate thoughts. The mind may just refuse to believe in them. When it is like that you can include some breathing exercises or concentration practice for a few minutes so your mind settles down a bit and is open to acknowledging these alternate realities.

- **Perfectionism**

- Also remember that our extreme way of thinking or focusing only on the bad may be arising from a need for perfectionism- a belief or ideal that says if I am not perfect I am nothing. Guess what? That's another extreme way of thinking, another distortion called "All or none" or "Black and white" thinking. It is actually true that multiple distortions are possible in our mind at the same time. That is the benefit of practicing the thought diary. We can start recognising distortions in our mind easily and then start the much needed work.

Summary

1. **A cognitive distortion is a distorted view or thinking pattern that prevents us from seeing the truth or reality of a situation.**
2. **To come out of such a pattern we can practice finding the evidence behind those false views and adopting whole views.**

Lesson 8: The flat tire

Description: How beliefs are formed

Story

Myra wakes up early in the mornings to go for a run. She knows that keeping physically fit keeps her mentally fit too. While running on the street one morning she sees that her neighbor Jenny's car had a flat tire. First she believes it must be a nail. But when she asks Jenny she says she's got it checked, it is perhaps a tire pressure issue. A few days pass by and Myra sees the same thing again. This time Jenny seems a bit confused and off and is wondering if something else has been up with the car. She has gotten the car tire checked but they never find a nail or a hole in it. A few days later it happened again. This time Myra discusses this with her brother Joe. He says it's possibly a case of vandalism if it's happening frequently,. Myra wonders- "Hmm, so there are people in our neighborhood who are harmful?". She worries. Her other neighbor reinforces the theory and asks her to tell Jenny to be careful. After having a call with Jenny that night she goes out to make sure her car is all locked up properly. That night she has an uneasy feeling and feels a bit more anxious than normal.

Next morning Jenny calls to tell her that the mechanic found the problem in the car and it is all sorted out. Myra is relieved and all the more resolved to work on her mental patterns and beliefs. "It is really just in the mind then, huh?", she thinks.

Story questions

- Q1** Can you identify the guesses or assumptions about what caused the flat tire in the story above?
- a. It must be a nail

- b. Its perhaps a flat tire issue
- c. It could be a case of vandalism
- d. There are people in the neighborhood who are harmful

Ans 1 All these are guesses and assumptions about what really happened to the flat tire.

Q2 Have you ever had a flat tire? What is your story about it?

Q3 Have you experienced a situation where the truth turned out to be very different from what you think was really going on?

Story Explanation

As we have seen from these stories again and again, it is clearly not the situation that is the cause of our problems. It is our interpretation of it. In our previous lessons we learnt how beliefs influence how we perceive reality. Now let us investigate deeply what beliefs really are, how they are formed and how we can start to break them open so we can be more rational, truth and evidence based.

-How beliefs are formed

-Genetics, upbringing, collective beliefs

- We all start with some genetics, value systems and upbringing in our homes. This is where some of our early beliefs come from. For example, Ishaan lives in a village and believes that if a cat crosses his way, something evil or harmful is going to happen. He believes it because everyone in his village does so.

-Assumptions, theories, guesses

- But as we go through various situations in life, our mind is continuously trying to interpret reality. Sometimes we know what the truth is, sometimes there isn't enough evidence. So we keep forming some theories, making guesses and assumptions. For example, when Myra first looked at the flat tire she assumed it to be just a nail causing it. Her neighbor Jenny's theory was that perhaps this was just some tire pressure issue. But with the flat tire happening again and again and those theories falling flat, Joe's theory became prominent in Myra's mind- that it must be vandalism. In the absence of any real evidence and repetitive fearful thinking around this, a new belief took shape that- "there is vandalism in our area" or "people in our neighborhood are harmful". So assumptions lead to beliefs. And beliefs lead to further assumptions. Harmful beliefs mostly form from assumptions made in an unwholesome mind.

-Unwholesome feelings, unhelpful thinking patterns affect what we assume about reality

- Unwholesome feelings and unhelpful thinking patterns can also affect how we perceive reality. So, in the flat tire situation, when Joe mentioned vandalism and another neighbor validated it, the belief that someone intends to harm became strong in Myra's mind. This also validated her old belief of "Something bad is going to happen or something is going to harm me" and now she was filled with unwholesome anxious feelings and worry coloring the perception of the situation. The reality was that the car had some tire issues only.

- Sometimes faulty perceptions of early failures set the trend for us- like in childhood if a person failed in Math exams a couple times, he started believing he cannot do Math at all. This is the case of interpreting evidence to an extreme, an unhelpful thinking pattern causing the harmful belief to form.

-Repetitive thoughts

-Partial view vs whole view

-Why to resolve to break free from beliefs

_Positive and negative beliefs

Beliefs can be both positive or negative. Now you may ask why cant we use positive beliefs instead of negative beliefs to change how we respond to a situation. Well, using positive beliefs or faith is good but sometimes what may appear to be positive may actually be a false delusional belief also far from reality. For example an olympics gymnast who has always won the gold so far in all competitions may start having a false positive belief that "I can never be defeated". But that cannot be true. Sooner or later he will be faced with a situation like meeting a tough competitor, growing old etc that will break that assumption and belief. So it is like getting ready for disaster to happen. Instead if we follow a more truth and evidence based approach, we are always grounded and centered.

-Identifying assumptions, interpretations, guesses and trying to stay close to truth by finding evidence

-Fact vs Opinion

-Socratic questioning

-What if assumption is the only choice because truth cannot be found out?

Then be cognizant of the truth that - this is an assumption. Don't believe it to be true.

Test your understanding

Q text

What are the practises that can help to break free from false beliefs?

- Use truth or evidence based approaches
- Identifying assumptions and guesses in our thinking
- Differentiating fact from fiction
- Keeping our mind calm and collected so we can interpret reality correctly

Q Ans

Thanks for sharing. All answers are helpful.

Q text

Can you think of an example of a false belief that you want to work on and be free of?

Q Ans

Thanks for sharing.

Lesson summary

- It is very important to understand that beliefs are not the same as truth.
- Beliefs are figments of our imagination, theories, guesses, assumptions or interpretations of reality.

- Beliefs can be negative. Some false beliefs can appear to be positive. Both are harmful.
- The first step to break free from false beliefs is to understand how to differentiate fact from fiction.
- It is only through truth or evidence based approaches that we can work our way out of suffering.

Cognitive distortions

Distortion I - All or nothing or Black and White Thinking

[On screen:

1. When boss says-
Your work is great but if you could work
on the communication a bit more.
2. If she cooks the food early in the morning daily only then she is a good cook.
3. When you get 90/100 but are wondering about the 10 instead of 90.
4. Losing 3 kilos is nothing. I need to lose 15 kilos and be slim otherwise I am not ok.

Description: Learning about “All or nothing” or Black and white thinking pattern

Introduction

Let us do a quick recap of what all or none or black and white thinking is.

This is where we see things in extremes- situations and people are either all good or all bad. We are unable to see shades of gray. If things are not perfect they are as good as nothing.

Examples:

I did not get into the first 100 ranks in the IIT JEE exam. That means I have failed.

If my wedding does not happen in a farmhouse it is not a wedding.

Story

Let us try to understand this a bit more with a story.

Akash is studying in Class X and dreams of becoming an Engineer when he grows up. He is good in his studies but is a bit afraid of Maths. He mostly scores well but does not feel confident.

Story Questions

How do you think Jay felt at this moment?

- a. Happy as the boss said the submission was great!
- b. Happy but also a little concerned about the changes.
- c. Upset as the boss suggested changes.

Now Jay, despite being in a cheerful mood, feels upset that the boss suggested some changes. He starts to think that he had failed this project because it wasn't perfect! The high he was riding on had ended! His happiness came crashing down and he couldn't stop thinking about how he failed and his "great work" streak ended. For Jay, it was difficult to take feedback. He felt it meant that he was not good enough. He went quietly back to his desk to make the changes and submitted the work again.

Now here, do you feel Jay's thinking pattern is Black and White (among others)?

- a. Yes
- b. No

After submitting his work, he begins to think about how he is feeling. He feels sad and upset.

What is the most effective strategy forward for Jay right now?

- a. Ignore the negative experience of the feedback and just distract himself with something else
- b. Try to keep a balanced view and generate alternative thoughts and perspectives
- c. React to the negative experience and resolve by thinking of ways he can ensure perfection in the future so he never has to go through this again

Story Explanation

Theory

But, let's take a moment to think about why is black and white thinking UNHELPFUL?

Since nobody and no situation is perfect, a person with Black and White thinking will end up falling into the negative thinking traps very often, as they are unable to accept both good and bad features of a person or situation. When something has such strict rules of failure and success, they are setting themselves up for failure.

Examples

So in the same situation as Jay's, what could be some HELPFUL alternate thoughts? Let us look at some here:

- a. My boss said the work was good, and suggested some minor changes. That does not mean I have "failed". I am still doing well. My boss is still happy with my work!
- b. My boss liked the work I did. The suggested changes were just a different perspective and probably what the client required. It does NOT mean my work is a "failure".
- c. My work was maybe not perfect and I am happy to improve.

- d. Now can you try and generate some HELPFUL alternate thoughts here?
-

Helpful Strategies

How do we generate these helpful alternative thoughts for Black and White Thinking?

1. Work on the Unhelpful thinking pattern

- Take out the Thought diary and enter the situation, thoughts, feelings, behaviors
- Identify the problematic thoughts and feelings that cause us to react
- Recognize the ones that indicate the distortion- Black and White thinking. Write these thoughts, feelings and behaviors down somewhere- for example: "My boss says my work is good but is asking me to make some changes, that means I have failed". Also note how you feel in the moment like Jay feels "sad" and "upset".
- Once we have identified the pattern that is the distortion, we can move on to the next step- finding the evidence behind those thoughts or beliefs.

2. Finding the truth (Where is the evidence?)

- a. Ask yourself this question- Where is the evidence that these thoughts are true?
- b. "I have failed" may actually not be true and could be coming from a faulty understanding of what it means to do a good job. Every being in the universe is a work in progress and there is always scope for improvement. Also due to different scenarios and situations like maybe a business need or a client need, changes can be required. It may be erroneous to think "I am a failure" if changes are being requested. It could also be coming from some deep negative beliefs that we have been living with like "I am not capable". So anytime the mind notices that my work is not accepted or appreciated like getting feedback to improve in this case it may be strengthening the belief even more leading to thoughts like "I have failed". Hence we have to start by finding the truth in our thoughts, evidence that perspective is not faulty.

3. Developing a whole perspective (Good AND bad)-

- a. Sometimes your assumptions or beliefs may not be completely faulty and there may be some truth there. For example, the thought "I have failed" may be arising from some memories and beliefs around previous failures. Maybe I failed in school in class 10th and I have not forgotten it. But is that all that is there? What about all the other successes? In this case, the boss even said "it's the best work she has ever seen". She also said "the submission was good and needs some minor changes". Only minor changes. But I just refuse to acknowledge those positive experiences and pieces of evidence. **The reality is that there is both good and bad and there is always some room for improvement.** This is how we can make a shift from an extreme perspective- "I have failed" to a balanced and whole perspective- "I have done well and only need to make some minor changes". Now that I have these new helpful thoughts, I can feel and act from a place of balance and be more whole and happier.

4. The challenge of negative emotions

- a. Sometimes when we are feeling low it may be difficult to generate such alternate thoughts. The mind may just refuse to believe in them. When it is like that you can include some breathing exercises or concentration practice for a few minutes so your mind settles down a bit and is open to acknowledging these alternate realities.

5. Perfectionism , Success and failure

- a. Wanting our work to be perfect or wanting to be perfect are also extreme views that are not based on reality or how the world works. Therefore this thinking is bound to bring misery. The whole world is a work in progress and so we are. There is both good and bad, light and dark, yin and yang in the universe. Defining ourselves by moments of successes and failures can only make us more reactive and fearful and limit our capabilities in turn. Instead we should see them as journey points in our life paths that we can simply learn from. We need to accept ourselves as a whole, not just black or white.

Distortion 2 - Catastrophizing

Description: Learning about Catastrophizing thinking pattern

Introduction

Let us try to understand an erroneous way of thinking called catastrophizing.

This is related to the phrase 'Making a mountain out of a molehill'. This is where we make very big issues of relatively small and minor issues.

Example:

If I don't do really well in this presentation I will lose my job

If I don't get through IIT I will never be financially stable.

If I don't get this home loan, I'll never be able to buy a home in this life.

Story

Let us understand a little more with a story.

Myra's younger sister Meera is visiting. Meera and Jenny get along really well and have decided to exercise daily together so they can motivate each other. They decide to start by jogging in a park near their house. Both of them have never jogged before. Jenny says that she was a lot into sports in school and had good stamina so she was sure she could jog at least a couple of kilometers easily. Myra was a little worried as she hadn't really jogged before. However, she was a dancer in school and felt she wouldn't be too bad and would be able to at least walk a few kilometers, if not jog. In their shoes and workout clothes, they start to jog slowly. Within a few minutes, Jenny has a pulled muscle. Meera intends to go on but within a few 100 feet, she too

feels tired and is extremely out of breath. She comes home and plonks herself on a sofa. She finds Meera sitting with an ice pack. They both look like wounded soldiers from a battle!

Seeing this, Meera begins to think that they will never be able to do this. They were relying on each other to motivate themselves and weren't able to get through a single day!! This means it would never happen. Meera feels sad and low. She really wanted to do this for herself. But now everything seems to be over. The only option was to simply give up.

Story questions

In this situation, do you think Meera's thoughts fall under the category of Catastrophizing?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Yes indeed it does!

Meera is making a big deal about almost nothing. When anyone exercises for the first time or after a long gap, it takes time to get back to it. The first attempt may not be what we are expecting but eventually, we can get to where we want to! It really wasn't a situation where they needed to simply give up.

Theory

Now, let's take a moment to think about why Catastrophizing is UNHELPFUL.

Catastrophizing pushes us to make very big problems out of relatively small issues. When we do that, our feelings associated with big problems take over and we go into crisis mode. We are unable to think of practical simple solutions and end up making decisions like "let's just give up!"

Now in this same situation as Meera, What could be some HELPFUL alternate thoughts?

- a. That first day was hard! But we learnt some real lessons - we need to start slow, make sure we warm up and not expect miracles!
 - b. Maybe we aren't as fit as we were in school, but we can work our way up to a decent level of fitness
 - c. I am glad we at least tried today! After months of just thinking about it and planning for it, we finally stepped out of the house and did something today. Yay!
 - d. Any other HELPFUL thoughts you can think of here?
-

Helpful Strategies

Great job!

Let us now look at how we can generate these helpful thoughts when we are indulging in catastrophizing.

1. Work on the Unhelpful thinking pattern

- Let's start with the Thought diary and note down the situation, thoughts, feelings, behaviors that are bothering us.
- Identify the problematic thoughts and feelings that cause us to react
- Recognize the ones that indicate the distortion- Catastrophizing.- for example after going for a run today for the first time in our life and not being able to run much, we think of the worst case outcome of the situation Meera has the thought "it would never happen, everything seems to be over". She feels sad. Similarly we can identify our thoughts and feelings indicative of the distortion.
- Once we have identified the pattern that is the distortion, we can move on to the next step- finding the evidence behind those thoughts or beliefs.

2. *Finding the truth- Where is the evidence?*

- a. In Catastrophizing we make a mountain out of a molehill. We magnify the worst case outcomes of a situation and start believing them to be true. In fact we believe so strongly in them that we are unable to consider any other possibilities. Like in Meera's case, her thinking that not being able to run more than a few mins in the first run of her life means she will never be capable of running again. This is an extreme conclusion. We need to go back to the basics and start with analyzing the truth in it.

- b. We first start with the question- Where is the evidence to support that only the worst can happen? Have we checked the facts? What does statistics say? Did every marathon runner run the fastest and longest race, the first time they ran? Did they give up in the first try itself? Do you also approach other things in life in the same way? What about the things that you are good at? For example at work or in school, don't you fail the first few times and gradually learn the tricks and techniques slowly?

It is very unrealistic to expect ourselves to succeed in anything the first time itself. These are faulty expectations which we should learn to stay away from. We are also clearly ignoring how the body really works. To be able to run for at least 5-10 mins, you need to do a warm up. It's also common knowledge that we need to keep fit to have strong leg and body muscles that can take the weight while running.

So now that we see there are so many facts about and around running that we have been ignoring, let's work towards developing a whole perspective, something that doesn't break so easily.

We can help ourselves by generating alternative perspectives like these- "It was only my first run, and what matters most is that I tried my best" or "The first run is often difficult for everyone because our body is not tuned for it. It will come with practice" or "It was so amazing that I went for running for the first time in my life, I will surely try again" etc.

3. *Developing a whole perspective- Decatastrophizing-*

- a. Decatastrophizing is a specific technique that works by asking you to consider different possibilities or outcomes for your situation. We start by asking- What else is really possible? What is the probability that my worst fear will come true? What is the possibility that other outcomes can also happen? Give them a percentage like 90% or 10%. Then try to validate your assumptions for why you think only your worst fear will come true. Why is something else not possible? Is it possible that I may be simply overthinking this? Am I just worrying too much? Sometimes talking to another person may also help to get a fresh perspective.

Distortion 3- Mind reading

Description: Learning about Mind reading thinking pattern

Story

Ashok's nephew Tariq has finished his 12th and is attending his first day in college. He is wearing jeans and a T-shirt and chappals. As he walks into the college gate he sees a huge crowd inside. He wonders about how he is looking especially in those chappals. In his view he was forced into buying them by his parents. Due to his toe-nail issue he is unable to wear shoes for a few days. He is feeling a bit conscious. As he reaches the main area he sees three girls standing near the verandah. On the right side there are a bunch of guys who are chit chatting. They all suddenly break into laughter. It must be him, he thinks. They must have seen me in these chappals. I must look like a fool. Look at them, they all look so cool. With a sad face he walks on. Just before he is about to turn he hears something make a loud noise. He sees a monkey running away with a tiffin box and a girl screaming and running after it. Now he looks back to the same folks again and notices that they are all laughing hard. He then realizes what has happened.

Q1

Have you been in a situation where you imagined things to be different from what they really were?
Please share.

Q2.

This type of thinking is a cognitive distortion called Mind reading where we imagine what others may be thinking and believe it to be true. Do you relate with this?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Theory

Mind reading is a cognitive distortion or an incorrect way of thinking wherein we assume we know what the other person is thinking based on our own perceptions. However, these are just that, assumptions and not facts.

For example- When I wished my boss in the morning she responded only with a basic smile when she usually is more chirpy and interactive. I am sure she is upset with my work quality and is thinking she made a mistake by hiring me.

He did not look at me, this means he is breaking up with me.

She looked weirdly at me, I am sure she is thinking what a fool I am.

This pattern is especially unhelpful because it is very detached from reality. It is based on what our mind “imagines” the reality to be. It is not factual. This kind of thinking may exacerbate lack of understanding between two people and even lead to relationship issues because we are not open to seeing the truth or finding the truth in others but rather busy making our own false versions of others or reality.

Helpful Strategies

How do we generate these helpful alternative thoughts for Mind Reading?

6. **Work on the Unhelpful thinking pattern**

- Take out the Thought diary and enter the situation, thoughts, feelings, behaviors
- Identify the problematic thoughts and feelings that cause us to react
- Recognize the ones that indicate the distortion- Catastrophizing. Write these thoughts, feelings and behaviors down somewhere- for example in Tariq’s case his thought - “They must be laughing at me, I must look like a fool” is not a validated truth, but his only imagination and interpretation of reality. Hence it is an unhelpful thought.
- We can learn to identify that it is a distortion, and then move on to the next step- finding the evidence behind those thoughts or beliefs.

7. **Where is the evidence-** When we get a negative belief or thought, it is important to question ourselves- where is the evidence to support this? Is the insecure thought that is arising in us right now just an assumption or is it based on reality? In Tariq’s case he first incorrectly concluded that others were laughing at him but soon it was revealed that it was the monkey running away with the tiffin box, not him. If Tariq had not seen the monkey running away he would have believed in his thought and suffered for a while. Hence we should always develop a habit to validate our assumptions.

8. **Good AND Bad** - This strategy helps in strengthening the whole perspective of a person or situation- focusing on both good AND bad accepting that every person and situation has both sides to them. If we look at only the bad we may start believing more in the bad side and automatically start assuming negative traits in the person. Now our mind reading would become even stronger. For example if my boss did not smile at me when she looked at me, if I already believe she is a bad person, I would easily make the assumption that she meant to insult me or does not like me etc. But if I see her as both good and bad, human and whole I will think it’s ok she is just having a hard day.

9. **Fact or opinion-** Investigating fact or opinion may be an especially helpful strategy here because it helps us see clearly that it is our interpretation of a situation or the other person that is causing us the pain. We should be factual in approaching situations. Is it really true or just my opinion is a good question to ask. Let's see with an example-
Fact: "It is true that sun rises in the universe" vs just my opinion
Opinion: "I think he is a mean person" or "I think they are laughing at me".
When we see our thoughts in this light, we become aligned to helpful ways of thinking.
10. **Seeking clarity-** A good way to approach this is to seek clarity, ask questions. It may not always be possible but when appropriate we can ask the other person if the assumption we made were true- like, "When you asked whether I cooked food, what did you mean?" Or "What are you guys laughing at? What is so funny?" Etc.

Distortion 4- Fortune Telling

Description: Learning about Fortune Telling Distortion

Story

Sheila had been a school teacher for 6 years. Although she loved teaching science to students, she also had a keen interest in Finance and had been taking online courses to prepare herself to get a job in the corporate world. This summer she finally quit her school job and decided to take the plunge.

After aggressively applying online for finance related jobs for two months, she did not receive a single positive response. At this point frustration took over her and she started thinking, "I am obviously not going to get a job, what is the point of applying any further?"

Q1.

This type of thinking is a cognitive distortion called Fortune telling where we predict a negative outcome for an event and start acting as if it has already happened. Do you relate with this?

1. Yes
2. No

Q2.

Where do you think Sheila may be incorrect in her thinking?

1. Her decision to change her job and domain is incorrect, she should go back to doing her school job
2. She should be more realistic in her thinking so she is not jumping to conclusions about what is going to happen too soon
3. She should have applied for the Finance jobs while she was in school
4. Something else _____

Theory

Fortune telling

This is where we think we predict a negative outcome for a situation, believe it to be true and begin to respond as if our prediction is factual.

Example:

I'm obviously not going to get the job so what's the point of even applying

I'm obviously going to fail in Maths, so what's the point of giving the test.

This kind of distortion is really UNHEIPFUL because here the belief in a negative outcome is so strong that it stops the person from even acting in wholesome ways, and does not let them make the necessary effort. The person just behaves as if the worst has already happened.

Helpful Strategies

How do we generate these helpful alternative thoughts for Fortune Telling?

1. **Where is the evidence-** When we get a negative belief or thought, it is important to question ourselves- where is the evidence to support this? Is the insecure thought that is arising in us right now just an assumption or is it based on reality. For example- Sheila's belief that she won't get the job now is rooted in her fear and frustration of not getting any job responses. She is taking rejection too hard too early and extrapolating it to believe in the worst. She has only given three months to applying for a job in a completely new domain. So the evidence is only 2 months old. Further, the evidence may be incomplete or erroneous - for example it may be that although she is applying online her applications aren't really getting picked up by the recruitment software, or her resume is not good enough to catch the eye of a recruiter. Her negative mind may be ignoring these significant pieces of evidence. This kind of fact-checking can help dispel the illusion of her overthinking a little bit.
2. **Work on the feeling-** This distortion can be rooted in feelings of frustration, sadness, hopelessness or depression. Since one is constantly feeling bad, one's belief in the negative outcomes can become strong and we can get stuck in a vicious cycle. It is as if our negative mind is made up and won't listen to anything else. To work on this we can go back to our breathwork- a mix of breathing exercises and concentration practices that help settle our feelings, calm us down and make us feel positive. Then we can go back to look at the scenario with a fresh perspective.
3. **Physical activity-** In scenarios like these where feelings overpower us too much it may also be a good idea to indulge in some kind of physical activity like walking, running or yoga so that we feel positive energy and don't remain stuck in our negative patterns.

Distortion 5: Discounting the good

Description: Learning about the Discounting the good distortion

Story

Post her recent promotion Ashok and Myra have started working together closely. Ashok keeps hearing from Myra about how she has slowly begun to transform her life by working on her limiting beliefs including how she had believed all this time that she could never get promoted. She is both excited about her new journey and embarrassed to share this.

Ashok on the other hand startles Myra by telling her that he has also had many such harmful beliefs, still does. For example, for a long time he believed that he was not a good leader. He was always very self critical and a perfectionist and never found his achievements satisfying. And even though he got frequent promotions and was popular as a colleague he never believed the success.

But he found a secret to looking differently and since then has been on a positive journey.

Ashok's new approach in life comes from doing deep work on himself. He started experimenting with various techniques and methods that could help him come out of those sticky beliefs. There is something that he particularly likes working on- Cognitive distortions.

Definition

Cognitive distortions are nothing but extremes or biases in our thinking that don't let us see the whole truth of the situation. We see erroneously and only partial realities.

For example- The distortion in Ashok's thinking is called Discounting the Good. Herein despite his many successes and achievements he only focuses on his failures. He continuously disregards the positive experiences and pieces of evidence he is getting and only believes in his weaknesses. Simply said in Discounting the Good we only see the bad in every situation and ignore the good.

Now, let's take a moment to think about why this is UNHELPFUL. This is unhelpful because it seems to be originating in such deep negative beliefs and thinking patterns that we are unable to acknowledge or accept a positive piece of evidence as it is. We simply reject any positive experiences.

Story questions

Q1 Do you feel you relate with this kind of distortion?

- ☒ c. Yes
- d. No

Ans 1 Hey, if you chose 'yes', you are not alone. Just like Myra and Ashok most people have at least one or more such distortions or unhelpful ways of thinking. And there are strategies to change these patterns for the better.

Q2 How is Ashok working on his deep rooted beliefs?

- a. By being a nice person so he can feel better about himself
- ☒ b. By recognizing unhelpful thinking patterns or cognitive distortions and working on them
- c. By avoiding problems altogether

Ans 2 We always start with identifying our unhelpful patterns- so In Ashok's case his unhelpful thoughts and feelings are- "I am not a good leader" and shame.

Q3 What is the first step to recognizing an unhelpful mind pattern like "Discounting the good" discussed above?

- d. By identifying helpful and unhelpful thoughts
- e. By being observant of our minds by practicing mindfulness
- f. By being observant of our minds by keeping a thought diary
- g. By working on breath

Ans 3 All of the above. We have to first start with recognition and detection of what is an unhelpful mental pattern in us. That can only happen by practices of observation like mindfulness or keeping a thought diary. Since a calm mind can think and observe more clearly, breathing exercises also help a lot.

Helpful Strategies

Great job!

Let us now look at how we can work on the unhelpful mental pattern where we are constantly discounting the good.

II. Work on Unhelpful thinking pattern

- Take out the Thought diary and enter the situation, thoughts, feelings, behaviors
- Identify the problematic thoughts and feelings that cause us to react
- Recognize the ones that indicate the distortion- Discounting the good. Write these thoughts, feelings and behaviors down somewhere- for example: Ashok thought "I am not a good leader"

or “I don’t deserve the promotion” despite him being liked by all and getting multiple promotions really fast. Also note how you feel in the moment like Ashok feels “shame”.

- Once we have identified the pattern that is the distortion, we can move on to the next step- finding the evidence behind those thoughts or beliefs.
- **Finding the truth (Where is the evidence?)**
 - Ask yourself this question- Where is the evidence that these thoughts are true?
 - “I am not a good leader” may actually just be coming from faulty understanding of what good leadership is. For example you are a Director in a technical company but unable to solve technical problems as well as you used to when you were younger. Now your current position may only require you to have good business and management skills which you may really be good at but you just unnecessarily compare yourself with your younger self or someone who is good technically and think that you should be like him or her. So now you realistically check all the good qualities you have that are needed for this particular leadership role.
- **The other thing that helps a lot here is Developing a whole perspective- (Good AND bad)**
 - Sometimes your assumptions or beliefs may not be completely faulty and there may be some truth there. For example, the thought “I am not a good leader” may be backed up by these truths about me -“ I don’t communicate well” and “I am hard on people when they commit mistakes”. But this may be an incomplete picture. There may be additional evidence to suggest that there are some goods in me too that I have been ignoring. For example, “Everyone voted for me as a great mentor just last week”. And “I give constructive feedback”. So it is only partially true that “I am not a good leader”. The reality is that there is both good and bad in me or we can say room for improvement. This is how we can make a shift from an extreme perspective- “I am not a good leader” to a balanced and whole perspective- “I have some qualities of a good leader, and there is room for improvement”. Now that I have these new helpful thoughts, I can feel and act from a place of balance and be more whole and happier.
- Now in light of these two strategies- Finding the evidence and developing a Whole view - try to generate Alternate thoughts for yourself. For example for Ashok, they can be, “It may be true that I am not the best leader out there but I am surely doing well” or “I am liked by all but I feel I have some areas to work on”. These are more truthful and whole ways to look at the situation. Once you write down alternative thoughts like these, also note down what feelings and behaviors can be associated with these. Now you can practice this daily and create a shift in your perspective towards healthy ways of thinking.
- **The challenge of negative emotions**
 - Sometimes when we are feeling low it may be difficult to generate such alternate thoughts. The mind may just refuse to believe in them. When it is like that you can include some breathing exercises or concentration practice for a few minutes so your mind settles down a bit and is open to acknowledging these alternate realities.
- **Perfectionism**
 - Also remember that our extreme way of thinking or focusing only on the bad may be arising from a need for perfectionism- a belief or ideal that says if I am not perfect I am nothing. Guess what? That’s another extreme way of thinking, another distortion called “All or none” or “Black and white” thinking. It is actually true that multiple distortions are possible in our mind at the same time. That is the benefit of practicing the thought diary. We can start recognising distortions in our mind easily and then start the much needed work.

Exercise: Cognitive distortions

Now that we are adept at identifying unhelpful and helpful thinking patterns, we can move to the next step. Here, we will understand about various types of unhelpful thinking patterns. We will look at about 10 different types.

Lets see what they are:

Thought Pattern	Do you relate
<p>Black and white thinking</p> <p>This is where we see situations and people as all good or all bad. We are unable to see shades of both good and bad in people or situations.</p> <p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>My boss said my work is "good but some aspects could be better" so that means i have failed completely.</i></p> <p><i>Winning is the only option, coming second is equal to a loss</i></p>	
<p>Catastrophizing</p> <p>This is related to the phrase 'Making a mountain out of a molehill'</p> <p>This is where we make very big issues of relatively small and minor issues.</p> <p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>I dont do really well in this presentation i will lose my job and never be able to find work</i></p>	

again and my entire life will be a total failure.	
<p>Mind reading</p> <p>This is when we assume we know what the other person is thinking based on our own perceptions. However, these are just that, assumptions and not facts.</p> <p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>When i wished my boss in the morning she responded with a simple smile when she usually is more chirpy. I am sure she is upset with my work quality and is thinking she made a mistake by hiring me.</i></p>	
<p>Fortune telling</p> <p>This is where we think we know the outcome of a situation, we believe it to be true and begin to respond as if our prediction is factual.</p> <p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>I'm obviously not going to get the job so whats the point of even applying</i></p>	
<p>Mental filtering</p> <p>This is when we filter out all the positive, wholesome and successful experiences and only focus on the negative, unwholesome and unsuccessful experiences.</p> <p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>We forget the times our partner did something nice for us and only remember and focus on all the times they did not meet our expectations.</i></p>	
<p>Shoulds</p> <p>This is there we have made some strict rules to follow for our lives, which are inflexible, rigid and cannot be broken under any circumstances. These are designed such that we are bound to fail sooner or later.</p> <p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>In order to be a good daughter, i must always do what my parents say</i></p> <p><i>In order to be successful in life i must always come first in everything</i></p>	
<p>Overgeneralizing</p> <p>This is where we generalize an experience based on a single event.</p> <p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>They ALWAYS do this</i></p> <p><i>They NEVER apologize</i></p> <p><i>Once a dog barked at me so ALL dogs are going to bark at me</i></p>	
<p>Disqualifying the positive</p> <p>This is where we actively discredit the positive, wholesome and successful situations by giving some excuse.</p> <p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>I know the presentation went well but that was because of my colleague who helped me a lot.</i></p> <p><i>I know i did well in that exam but that was pure luck!</i></p>	
<p>Labeling</p> <p>This is where we give labels to ourselves, which can be limiting and rigid.</p> <p><i>Examples</i></p> <p><i>I am stupid</i></p> <p><i>I am useless</i></p> <p><i>I am food for nothing</i></p>	
<p>Personalizing</p> <p>This is where we tend to blame ourselves for everything going wrong, which may not even</p>	

concern us. <i>Example</i> <i>My friend is looking upset today. Im sure its something ive done to upset her</i> <i>My roommates are having an argument, im sure its because of me</i>	
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Now that we have understood the various categories a little bit, we could try and identify the same in the following examples as well:

Match the following exercise 1:

1. "They are going to fire me"	4. Disqualifying the Positive
2. "I should not be feeling like this"	3. Overgeneralization
3. "I am always sabotaging my life"	2. Shoulds
4. "I know I have been able to handle big presentations before, but that was pure luck!"	5. Mind Reading
5. "Everybody is looking at me and thinking how idiotic i am"	1. Fortune Telling

a. Overgeneralization

1. "I am a lazy person"	2. Black and white
2. "He is just a bad person. There is nothing he can do that is nice"	5. Mental Filtering
3. "My friend is not replying to my message for the last hour. This means something bad would have happened to her. Shall I call her parents or maybe the cops!"	4. Personalizing
4. "My investments aren't giving me good returns. It is my fault for having made bad decisions"	1. Labeling
5. Despite driving everyday and parking my car in the same spot, one day I am struggling and think, "I am a terrible driver and am never able to park here!"	3. Catastrophizing

Now let's try to take this a step further. The following examples fall in more than 1 category:

"My boss looks upset because of me. She must be thinking that i need to be fired"

- a. Black and white
- b. Catastrophizing
- c. Mind reading
- d. Fortune telling
- e. Mental filtering
- f. Shoulds
- g. Overgeneralization
- h. Disqualifying the positive

- i. Labeling
- j. Personalizing

"My partner never does anything romantic for me. He obviously doesn't love me. He is going to break up with me tonight"

- a. Black and white
- b. Catastrophizing
- c. Mind reading
- d. Fortune telling
- e. Mental filtering
- f. Shoulds
- g. Overgeneralization
- h. Disqualifying the positive
- i. Labeling
- j. Personalizing

"My first date has to go perfectly for me to have any hope of finding someone. Otherwise i am doomed in the romance department"

- a. Black and white
- b. Catastrophizing
- c. Mind reading
- d. Fortune telling
- e. Mental filtering
- f. Shoulds
- g. Overgeneralization
- h. Disqualifying the positive
- i. Labeling
- j. Personalizing

Now that we have an idea about the categories, let's see if we can identify these in our own thoughts.

Day/ Date	Situation	Thoughts	Feelings	Helpful/ Unhelpful	Thought Category
30/04 Saturday	I saw my partner feeling really low and upset. I asked them but they didnt want to talk about it	Im sure i messed up Last night when we were talking i said this dumb thing about his job. Im sure he hates me now Hes rethinking this entire relationship Im so dumb I always do this	Anxious Worried	Unhelpful	Personalizing Mind reading Labeling Overgeneralising

Similarly, you can try this exercise with your previous entries.
(Go to the table with added column and have them practice one)

Now that we have identified which categories we relate most to, lets look at these a little deeper. (table with their selected categories and explanations, they can click on any one to open a lesson.)

Lesson 5- Beliefs/Situations and Strategies

	Situations	Strategies
1	I am worthless	
2	I am unlovable	
3	I am boring	
4	I am unlikable	
5	I am not good looking	
6	I am incapable	
7	People will hurt me or reject me	
8	I have to appear intelligent and witty	
9	If I make mistakes, others will reject me	
10	If someone doesn't like me, it must be my fault	
11	If people see me anxious, they will reject me	

12	I am a failure	
13	I am stupid	
14	My future is hopeless	
15	I can't control my thoughts	
16	I am not a good person	
17	I cannot control my drinking habit	
18	I cannot do Maths	
19	I will fail in my exams	
20	I will never be able to swim	
21	I will never be able to make friends	
22	I will never be able to speak in public	
23	I have to excel	
24	I am inferior	
25	It's all my fault	

Situations

All or none

1. If I can get up in the morning and meditate, then only I am a good meditator.
2. Losing 4 kilos means nothing. I need to lose 15 kilos and be totally slim otherwise I am not ok.
3. If I get through IIT, only then Engineering makes sense, otherwise it means nothing.

Discounting the good

1. I got 75/100 in the Math exam, this means I have failed.
2. Today I could not dance as well as I usually do, maybe I am not such a good dancer?
3. My boss says you are doing great work, just work on the communication a bit more. Am I not good enough?
4. My husband said, "Of all the women in the world, you are the best". What does he mean by "all the women"?

Catastrophizing

1. He gives me a rose every day, but today he did not get me one. That means we are breaking up.
2. I did not do well in that presentation, I think I will lose my job.
3. My husband always picks up the calls or returns the call as soon as he gets a moment. Today he is neither picking any calls nor calling me back. This means he is avoiding me.

Mind reading

5. My boss wasn't looking at me much during the team meeting today, that means he didn't like my work.
6. She smiles and says Hi to me daily. Today she just walked past me. That means she doesn't like me anymore.
7. My husband said, "Of all the women in the world, you are the best".

Fortune telling

1. I am obviously not going to get the job, what is the point of even applying.
2. Clearly they have the best team and captain, they will win the match. Why should I even bother to practice?
3. This is the Math Exam. There's no point giving it, I know I will fail.
4. I saw the ABC guy shake hands and talk with the Turin Inc VP in the hall. This means they are getting the contract.