

Try These Cognitive Restructuring Exercises to Improve Your Mood and Reduce Stress

by Alice Boyes January 31, 2013

Cognitive restructuring is a core part of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT is one of the most effective psychological treatments for common problems like depression, anxiety disorders, and binge eating. Here, clinical and social psychologist Alice Boyes shares some CBT techniques you can try at home to reduce problems with mood, anxiety, and stress.

Practice Noticing When You're Having a Cognitive Distortion

Example: You recognize that you're prone to negative predictions. For a week, just notice any times you find yourself making a negative prediction—for example, you might notice yourself expecting not to enjoy a party, expecting to feel too tired to exercise, expecting that your boss won't like an idea, etc.

When you find yourself having the cognitive distortion, ask yourself: What other ways you could think? For the negative predictions example, you might ask yourself what other outcomes are possible. Try these three questions: What's the worst possible thing that could happen? The best possible thing that could happen? The most realistic?

Track the Accuracy of a Thought

Example: Your rumination-related thought is "If I think a lot about my problem, it'll help me find a solution." For this example, you might write down each time you notice yourself ruminating (overthinking) in one column, and in a second column note if the rumination actually lead to useful problem solving.

At the end of the week, determine what percentage of the times you ruminated it led to useful problem solving? Another great idea is to record the approximate number of minutes you were ruminating each time you notice it. Then you can determine how many minutes of rumination you did for each useful problem solving idea.

Behaviorally Testing Your Thought

Example: Your thought is "I don't have time to take breaks." For a week (week 1), you could follow your usual routine and at the end of each day, rate your productivity on a 0-10 scale. For week 2, you could take a five minute break every 60 minutes and do the same ratings. You would then compare your productivity ratings across the two weeks.

Evaluate the Evidence For/Against Your Thought

Example: Your thought is "I can never do anything right." You could write one column of objective evidence (column A) that supports the idea that you can never do anything right, and one column of objective evidence that your thought is not true (column B).

Then, you'd write a couple of balanced thoughts that accurately reflect the evidence, for example: "I've made some mistakes that I feel embarrassed about but a lot of the time, I make good choices." You don't need to completely believe the new thoughts. For a start, just experiment with trying them on for size.

Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness meditation involves picking a focus of attention, such as your breathing. For a set number of minutes, you focus on experiencing the sensations of your breathing, as opposed to thinking "about" your breathing. Whenever any thoughts come into your mind, gently (and without self-criticism) bring your attention back to experiencing the sensations of your breathing. Mindfulness meditation isn't specifically a tool for cognitive restructuring but it's a great way to train yourself to be mindful (aware) of when you've become lost in thought. Mindful awareness of what thoughts you're having is an essential first step in cognitive restructuring.

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion involves talking to yourself kindly whenever you have a sense of suffering. Like mindfulness meditation, self-compassion isn't specifically a tool for cognitive restructuring, but it has that effect.

Example: You've done something silly and normally you'd call yourself a "stupid idiot." Instead you take a self-compassion approach. You acknowledge you've made a mistake, that you feel embarrassed, and that this is part of the universal human experience. Over time, if you replace self-criticism with self-compassion, your thoughts will change. As you do this, you might notice your thoughts about other people becoming kinder and more accepting too.