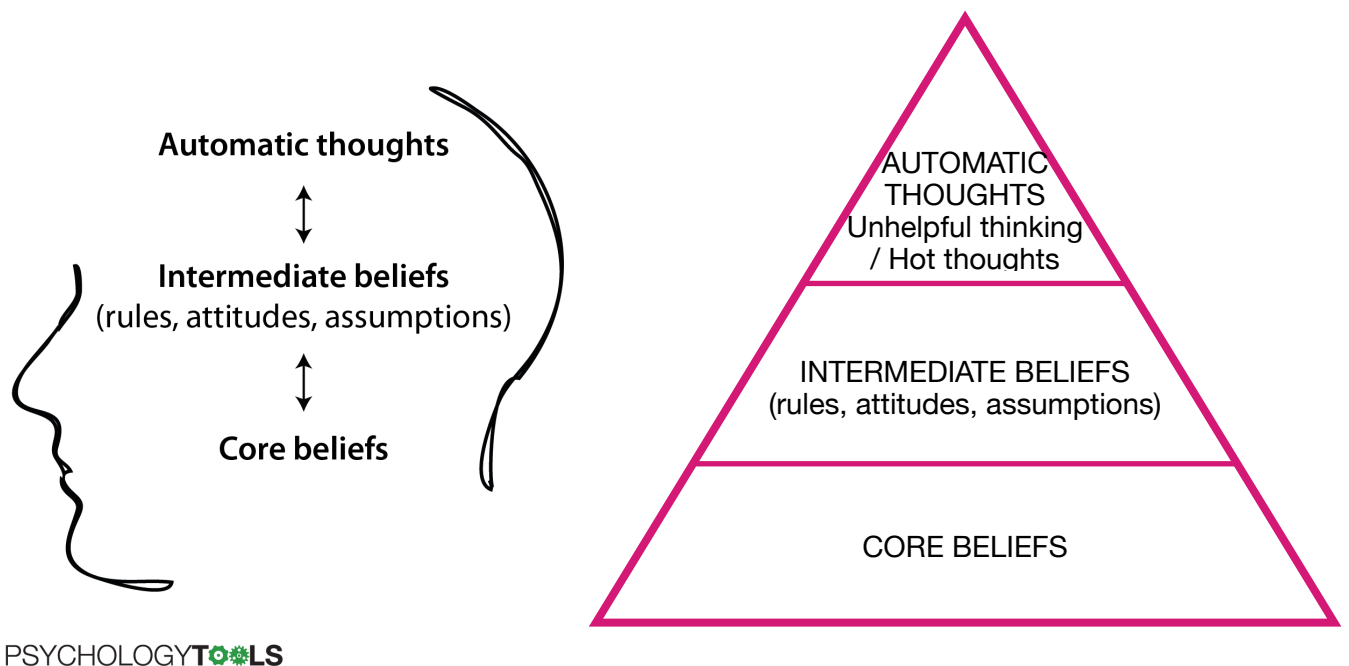


CBT is a ‘doing therapy’

CBT is a great way of understanding of what is keeping a problem going and when we are armed with that information our job is to take action in order to get it ‘unstuck’. What makes CBT different is that it is not just a ‘talking therapy’. Psychologists have found that to be really helpful, a therapy has to help you to make changes in your life and so it is better to think of CBT as a ‘doing therapy’. CBT therapists can choose from a huge range of strategies and techniques to promote change.



People think on different levels

Cognitive behavioural therapy recognises that human beings think on different levels: we say that people have **different levels of cognition**. Cognitive behavioural therapists will help their patients to examine their thinking at all of these levels and will choose therapy techniques which target the most appropriate level.

Automatic Thoughts

The level closest to the surface are **automatic thoughts**. These are thoughts or images which involuntarily ‘pop’ into our minds. They often appear in response to a trigger which can be an event, feeling, or another thought or memory. Automatic thoughts can be accurate (in which case CBT therapists would tend to leave them alone), or they can be biased (in which case they may merit further discussion). Some examples of automatic thoughts include:

- Fails to complete a task > “That was pathetic”
- Talking to a girl I like > “She’ll think I’m an idiot”

- Waiting to demonstrate my work > Mental image of myself failing and being humiliated, others laughing at me

Intermediate Beliefs

The middle level of cognitions are **intermediate beliefs**, which often take the form of **rules and assumptions**. These can often be phrased in the form of “*If... then*” statements or contain the tell-tale words ‘should’ or ‘must’. We may hold on to our rules or assumptions as ways of preventing the worst consequences of our core beliefs from coming true. Examples of rules and assumptions include:

- If I work hard then no-one will find out how useless I am
- Everyone around me must be happy or I have failed
- I must always be on my guard or else I will be hurt

Core Beliefs

The deepest level of cognitions are our **core beliefs**. These are often unspoken and may never have been verbalised. We often hold core beliefs as ‘truths’ about ourselves, the world, or other people, but it is important to remember that they are opinions and not facts. We are not born with them, but rather they are the product of our life experiences. They can be thought of as our implicit answers to the question “*What has life taught you [about yourself, other people, or the world]?*”. Core beliefs often take the form of ‘absolute’ statements. Examples of some negative core beliefs include:

- I am useless / unlovable / stupid
- Other people are critical / cruel / uncaring
- The world is cold / uncaring / unfair

It is important to recognise that cognitions at different levels interact: the kinds of automatic thoughts that we have are often determined by the kinds of core beliefs that we hold (in fact, therapists often look for patterns in automatic thoughts in order to take educated guesses about what core beliefs their patient holds). For example, when confronted with an ambiguous situation where they *may* have been let down by a friend, the person who holds the core belief “*I am unlovable*” is more likely to have an automatic thought “*I don’t matter to them*”. Similarly, when confronted with an ambiguous situation where other people *might* give good or bad feedback, the person who holds the core beliefs “*I’m stupid*” and “*Other people are critical*” is more likely to have the automatic thoughts (predictions in this case) “*They’ll think I’m an idiot*” and “*They’ll make my life hell*”. Cognitions at any of the levels can be more or less helpful – CBT therapists will be looking to identify thoughts, beliefs, or rules that are potentially self-defeating.

Thinking can be biased

Cognitive behavioural therapy recognises that any of our thoughts, beliefs, or rules can be more or less accurate ways of perceiving the world. A thought can be positive “*I did well*” or negative “*I did badly*”, but this is less important than whether it is **accurate or inaccurate**. Despite what we might prefer, it is unavoidable that bad things will happen to all of us. Trying to avoid every negative event, thought, or emotion is a losing battle and would in any case be counterproductive. More important is that our thinking can be inaccurate. And because our feelings are influenced by the way we think, we often experience negative emotions because we believe inaccurate things – it is as though we feel bad because we are lying to ourselves! Thoughts can become biased for many reasons:

- **We are fed incorrect information.** A child may come to believe something bad about themselves because they are suggestible and because they don’t have an accurate view of how the world works. If a caregiver repeatedly gives them the message that they are not loved, then they may come to believe that they are unlovable.
- **We ‘think fast’ and take shortcuts.** Human beings are not robots and we take shortcuts and make mistakes in our thinking. The psychologist Daniel Kahneman described how these shortcuts are ‘hardwired’ in his book *Thinking fast and slow*.
- **Beliefs perpetuate themselves.** We may pay attention in biased ways which serves to maintain our biased thinking. If we think we are stupid, then we are more likely to pay attention to times that ‘prove’ this belief and may ignore contradictory evidence.

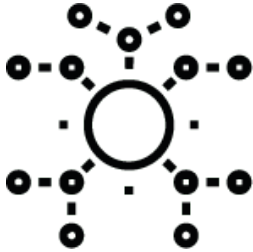
People’s thinking becomes biased in characteristic ways. In Beck’s early work on depression he recognised that “*even in mild phases of depression, systematic deviations from realistic and logical thinking occur*” [6]. Four of the ‘cognitive distortions’ that Beck identified early on included:



Arbitrary interpretation which describes the process of “forming an interpretation of a situation, event, or experience when there is no factual evidence to support the conclusion or when the conclusion is contrary to the evidence”. An example of arbitrary interpretation would be having an interaction with a shopkeeper and having the thought “*they think I’m worthless*”.



Selective abstraction which describes the process of “focusing on detail taken out of context, ignoring other more salient features of the situation, and conceptualising the whole experience on the basis of this element”. An example of selective abstraction would be receiving a ‘B+’ grade on a piece of schoolwork, paying particular attention to a comment about how it could be improved, and thinking “*I did badly*”.



Overgeneralisation describes individual’s patterns of “drawing a general conclusion about their ability, performance, or worth on the basis of a single incident”. An example of overgeneralisation would be a father noticing their three-year-old child pushing another child in the playground and thinking to himself “*I’m a poor parent because he’s a rude child*”



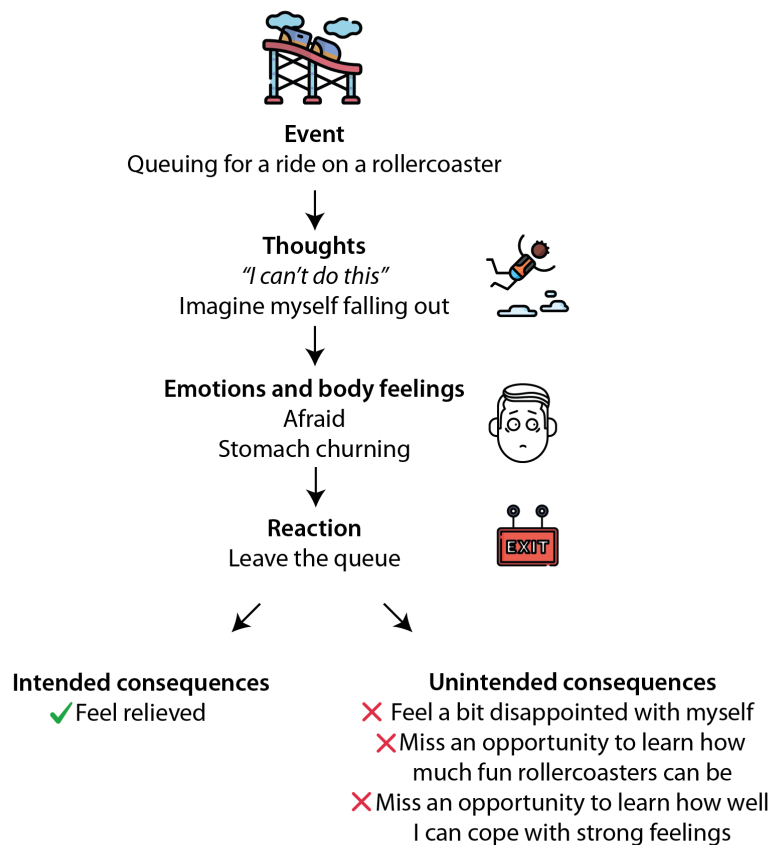
Magnification and minimisation describe “errors in evaluation which are so gross as to constitute distortions ... manifested by underestimation of the individual’s performance, achievement, or ability, and inflation of the magnitude of his problems and tasks ... It was frequently observed that the patients’ initial reaction to an unpleasant event was to regard it as a catastrophe”. An example of magnification would be receiving a telephone call from a friend to say they will be late to a meet-up and thinking “*well, the evening is ruined*”.

To learn more about the ways in which people’s thinking can become biased read our [Psychology Tools guide to unhelpful thinking styles](#).

Things that we do can have unintended consequences

The physicist Isaac Newton’s third law of motion states that “*Every action has an equal and opposite reaction*” [7]. Our actions are similar – everything that we do has a consequence. Some consequences are intended, but others are not. A common step in

CBT is to ask the question “*What were the consequences of acting that way?*”. You might have escaped a frightening situation with the (intended) consequence that you felt safer. But perhaps some unintended consequences were that you learned that it feels good to escape and escaping became your ‘go to’ strategy for handling tricky situations. Therapists who use CBT are trained to pay particular attention to any sequences that appear to get stuck in a loop or jammed (where an action feeds back to cause more of the problem).



PSYCHOLOGYTOOLS®

Figure: Our actions have intended and unintended consequences.

For example, if you suffer from depression you might spend much of the time feeling sad, low, and demotivated. When you feel that way it is difficult to do the things that used to give you pleasure, and so you might avoid situations with the intended consequence of conserving your energy. Unfortunately, the unintended consequence of behaving this way is that you have fewer opportunities for good things to happen to you, and the result is that you stay depressed.