

STEP 1

Situation

What happened? What triggered this moment?



STEP 2

Automatic Thought

What did your mind say instantly — without you choosing it?



STEP 3

Emotion

What feeling followed that thought? (See Handout #1)



STEP 4

Body Sensation

Where did you feel it physically? What did your body do?



STEP 5

Behavior

What did you do — or avoid doing — in response?

WHY THIS MATTERS

In CBT, we work with **automatic thoughts** — the rapid, habitual interpretations our minds make about what's happening. The same situation can produce completely different emotions depending on what thought appears first.

A person who thinks "**They're ignoring me**" after not getting a text back will feel anxious or hurt. Someone who thinks "**They're probably just busy**" will feel calm. Same situation — different thought — different feeling — different behavior.

When we learn to **identify, slow down, and question** automatic thoughts, we gain more choice over how we feel and what we do next.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Scenario: You send an important email to your supervisor and receive no reply for the rest of the day.

SITUATION No reply to an important email all day

THOUGHT "They're ignoring me. I must have done something wrong."

EMOTION Anxious, hurt, ashamed

BODY Tight chest, stomach in knots, can't concentrate

BEHAVIOR Avoid the supervisor, check email every few minutes, rehearse apologies

KEY DEFINITIONS

SITUATION

The trigger — an event, memory, image, or sensation that starts the chain. The situation itself is neutral; your thought about it is what creates the feeling.

AUTOMATIC
THOUGHT

A quick, involuntary interpretation — it pops up without effort and usually feels like fact, not opinion. These are the thoughts CBT targets.

EMOTION

The feeling produced by the automatic thought — not the situation itself. One-word emotions (see Handout #1) are most useful here.

BODY SENSATION

How the emotion shows up physically — tension, heaviness, heart rate, nausea, fatigue. The body often signals an emotion before the mind labels it.

BEHAVIOR

What you do — or avoid — in response. Behaviors can reinforce or challenge the original thought, creating a feedback loop.