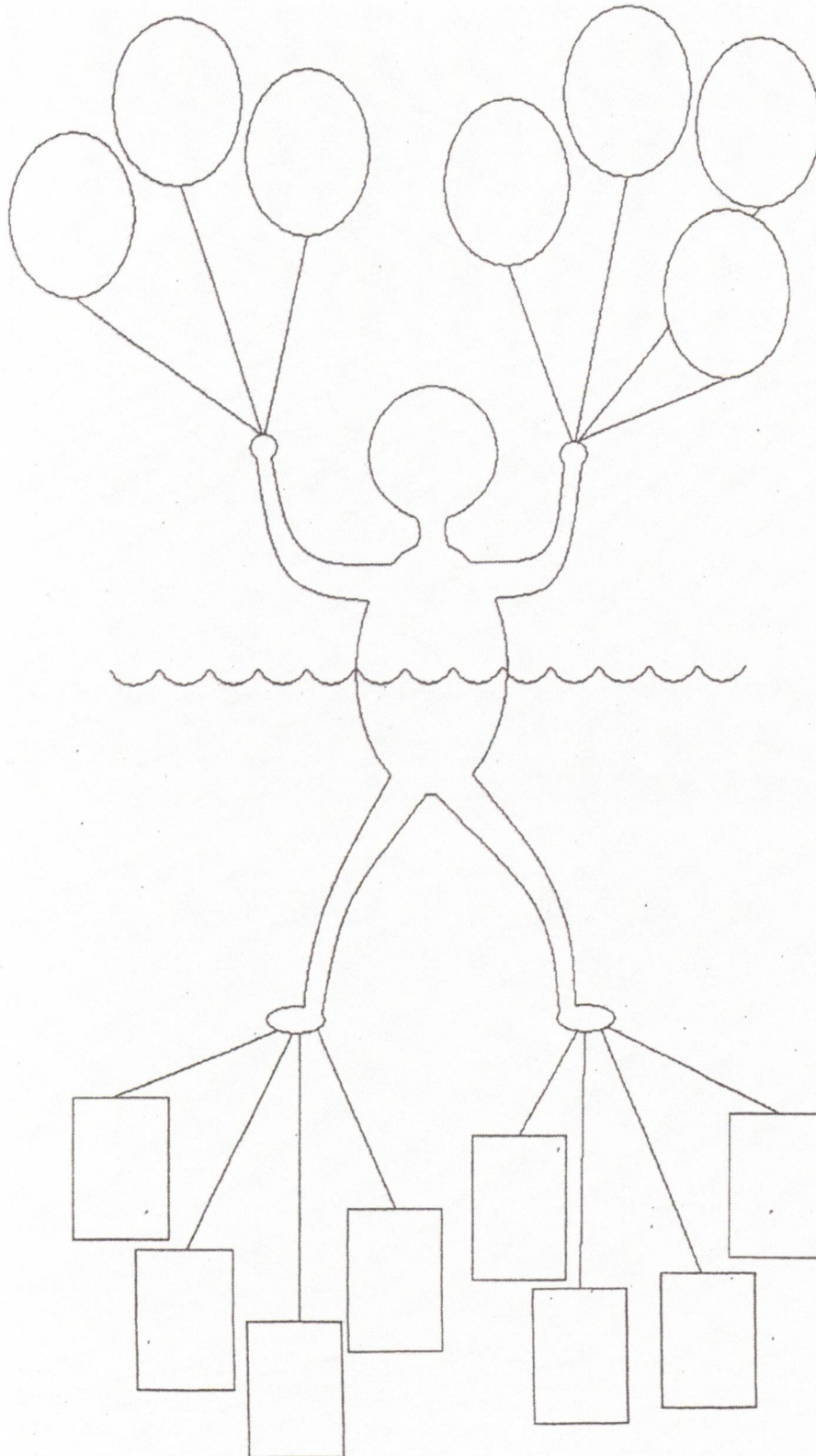


## Staying Afloat



What kinds of things drag you down? And what gives you a lift? Is there enough to keep your head above water?

# ■ Top-Down Processing for Reducing Anxiety

## 1. What is Top-Down Processing?

Top-down processing is when our brain uses higher-level thinking — beliefs, expectations, and reasoning — to interpret and manage what we perceive. Instead of reacting automatically to sensory input (bottom-up), we filter experiences through perspective and thought. In anxiety, this helps the rational brain calm the emotional brain.

## 2. How It Helps Reduce Anxiety

■ Reframing Thoughts	Interpret body signals (like a racing heart) as temporary stress or excitement instead
■ Attention Control	Mindfulness and focus techniques redirect attention away from worry.
■ Exposure with Guidance	During therapy, the prefrontal cortex overrides fear signals, reducing anxiety triggers
■ Self-Talk	Using calming statements (“I can handle this”) recruits top-down reasoning to counte
■ Goal-Oriented Action	Choosing actions based on long-term goals, not fear, strengthens rational control.

## 3. Key Takeaway

Top-down processing reduces anxiety by letting the thinking brain regulate the emotional brain. Through skills like reframing, mindfulness, self-talk, and exposure, we can retrain how the brain interprets and responds to stress.

# CBT Scenarios Highlighting Thinking Distortions

## Distortion: Catastrophizing

**Context:** Maria, a university student, got 75% on a psychology midterm. She expected 85%.

**Automatic Thought:** "I got a 75%. That's terrible. I'm obviously not smart enough for psychology. If I can't even handle one class, I'll probably fail the course, drop out of college, and never get a decent job."

**Emotional Consequences:** Anxious, defeated, hopeless.

**Behavioral Consequences:** Avoids studying, procrastinates, loses motivation.

**Balanced Alternative Thought:** "75% is lower than I wanted, but it's still passing. I can learn from mistakes, ask for help, and do better on the next exam."

## Distortion: All-or-Nothing Thinking

**Context:** James tries to eat healthier but had a slice of cake at a party.

**Automatic Thought:** "I blew my diet. I have no willpower. I might as well give up completely."

**Emotional Consequences:** Guilty, frustrated, ashamed.

**Behavioral Consequences:** Abandons healthy eating plan, overeats afterward.

**Balanced Alternative Thought:** "One slice of cake doesn't ruin my progress. I can still eat healthy at the next meal."

## Distortion: Mind Reading

**Context:** A coworker didn't say hi to Sarah in the hallway.

**Automatic Thought:** "She must be mad at me. I probably did something wrong."

**Emotional Consequences:** Worried, insecure, self-conscious.

**Behavioral Consequences:** Avoids the coworker, ruminates on possible mistakes.

**Balanced Alternative Thought:** "Maybe she was just distracted or in a hurry. I can't know what she's thinking without asking."

## Distortion: Overgeneralization

**Context:** Alex applied for one job and didn't get it.

**Automatic Thought:** "I'll never get a job. I'm a failure at everything."

**Emotional Consequences:** Discouraged, hopeless.

**Behavioral Consequences:** Stops applying for jobs, isolates from others.

**Balanced Alternative Thought:** "I didn't get this job, but that doesn't mean I'll never get one. Each application is a new opportunity."

# ■ Top-Down Processing for Anxiety: Practice Worksheet

This worksheet helps you practice using top-down strategies to reduce anxiety. Use the spaces below to reflect and apply techniques.

## 1. Reframing Thoughts

Write down an anxious thought. Then reframe it into a calmer, more balanced perspective.

Anxious Thought: \_\_\_\_\_

Reframed Thought: \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. Attention Control

Notice when your attention is stuck on worry. Write one thing you can focus on in the present moment instead.

Worry Focus: \_\_\_\_\_

Present-Moment Focus: \_\_\_\_\_

## 3. Calming Self-Talk

Write down 2-3 self-talk phrases you can use when anxiety rises.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

## 4. Goal-Oriented Action

When anxiety tells you to avoid something, think of one action you can take that aligns with your long-term goals instead.

Anxiety Wants Me To: \_\_\_\_\_

My Goal-Oriented Action: \_\_\_\_\_

# CBT Scenarios Handout

This handout contains scenarios illustrating common thinking distortions, along with space for reflection and practice.

## Distortion: Catastrophizing

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Reflection Questions	Your Notes
1. Have you ever experienced a similar thought?	
2. How did it make you feel?	
3. What did you do in response?	
4. What might be a balanced thought you could try?	

## Distortion: All-or-Nothing Thinking

**Context:** James tries to eat healthier but had a slice of cake at a party.

**Automatic Thought:** "I blew my diet. I have no willpower. I might as well give up completely."

**Emotional Consequences:** Guilty, frustrated, ashamed.

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**Context:** A coworker didn't say hi to Sarah in the hallway.

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Reflection Questions	Your Notes
1. Have you ever experienced a similar thought?	
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## Distortion: Overgeneralization

**Context:** Alex applied for one job and didn’t get it.

**Automatic Thought:** “I’ll never get a job. I’m a failure at everything.”

**Emotional Consequences:** Discouraged, hopeless.

**Behavioral Consequences:** Stops applying for jobs, isolates from others.

**Balanced Alternative Thought:** “I didn’t get this job, but that doesn’t mean I’ll never get one. Each application is a new opportunity.”

Reflection Questions	Your Notes
1. Have you ever experienced a similar thought?	
2. How did it make you feel?	
3. What did you do in response?	
4. What might be a balanced thought you could try?	

## CHECKLIST OF COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

1.	<b>All or nothing thinking:</b> You look at things in absolute, black and white categories.
2.	<b>Overgeneralization:</b> You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3.	<b>Mental Filter:</b> You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives.
4.	<b>Discounting the positives:</b> You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities "don't count."
5.	<b>Jumping to conclusions:</b> (A) Mind reading – you assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there's no definite evidence for this; (B) Fortune Telling – you arbitrarily predict things will turn out badly.
6.	<b>Magnification or Minimization:</b> You blow things way out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately.
7.	<b>Emotional Reasoning:</b> You reason from how you feel: "I feel like an idiot, so I really must be one." Or "I don't feel like doing this, so I'll put it off."
8.	<b>"Should Statements":</b> You criticize yourself or other people with "Shoulds" or "Shouldn'ts." "Musts," "Oughts," "Have tos" are similar offenders.
9.	<b>Labeling:</b> You identify with your shortcomings. Instead of saying, "I made a mistake," you tell yourself, "I'm a jerk," or "a fool," or "a loser."
10.	<b>Personalization and Blame:</b> You blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behavior might contribute to a problem.

## TEN WAYS TO UNTWIST YOUR THINKING

1.	<b>Identify the Distortion</b>	Write down your negative thoughts so you can see which of the ten cognitive distortions you're involved in. This will make it easier to think about the problem in a more positive and realistic way.
2.	<b>Examine the Evidence</b>	Instead of assuming that your negative thought is true, examine the actual evidence for it. For example, if you feel that you never do anything right, you could list several things you have done successfully.
3.	<b>The Double-Standard Method</b>	Instead of putting yourself down in a harsh, condemning way, talk to yourself in the same compassionate way you would talk to a friend with a similar problem.
4.	<b>The Experimental Technique</b>	Do an experiment to test the validity of your negative thought. For example, if, during the episode of panic, you become terrified that you're about to die of a heart attack, you could jog or run up and down several flights of stairs. This will prove that your heart is healthy and strong.
5.	<b>Thinking in Shades of Grey</b>	Although this method might sound drab, the effects can be illuminating. Instead of thinking about your problems in all-or-nothing extremes, evaluate things on a range of 0 to 100. When things don't work out as well as you hoped, think about the experience as a partial success rather than a complete failure. See what you can learn from the situation.
6.	<b>The Survey Method</b>	Ask people questions to find out if your thoughts and attitudes are realistic. For example, if you believe that public speaking anxiety is abnormal and shameful, ask several friends if they ever felt nervous before they gave a talk.
7.	<b>Define Terms</b>	When you label yourself "inferior" or "a fool" or "a loser," ask, "What is the definition of a 'fool'?" You will feel better when you see that there is no such thing as a "fool" or a "loser."
8.	<b>The Semantic Method</b>	Simply substitute language that is less colorful and emotionally loaded. This method is helpful for "should statements." Instead of telling yourself "I shouldn't have made that mistake," you can say, "It would be better if I hadn't made that mistake."
9.	<b>Re-attribution</b>	Instead of automatically assuming that you are "bad" and blaming yourself entirely for a problem, think about the many factors that may have contributed to it. Focus on solving the problem instead of using up all your energy blaming yourself and feeling guilty.
10.	<b>Cost-Benefit Analysis</b>	List the advantages and disadvantages of a feeling (like getting angry when your plane is late), a negative thought (like "No matter how hard I try, I always screw up"), or a behavior pattern (like overeating and lying around in bed when you're depressed). You can also use the Cost-Benefit Analysis to modify a self-defeating belief such as, "I must always try to be perfect."

## YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

1.	Sadness or Depression	Loss, a romantic rejection, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or the failure to achieve an important personal goal.
2.	Guilt or Shame	You believe that you've hurt someone or that you've failed to live up to your own moral standards. Guilt results from self-condemnation, where as shame involves fear that you'll lose face when others find out about who you really are.
3.	Anger, Irritation, Annoyance, or Resentment	You feel that someone is treating you unfairly or trying to take advantage of you.
4.	Frustration	Life falls short of your expectations. You insist that things should be different. It might be your own performance ("I shouldn't have made that mistake"), what someone else does ("He should've been on time!"), or an event ("Why does the traffic always slow down when I'm in a hurry?").
5.	Anxiety, Worry, Fear, Nervousness or Panic	You believe you're in danger because you think something bad is about to happen. "What if the plane crashes? What if my mind goes blank when I give my talk in front of all those people? What if this chest pain is the start of a heart attack?"
6.	Inferiority or Inadequacy	You compare yourself to others and conclude that you're not as good as they are because you're not as talented, attractive, charming, successful, intelligent. "She's really got what it takes. She's so cute. All the men are chasing her. I'm just average. There's nothing very special about me."
7.	Loneliness	You tell yourself that you're bound to feel unhappy because you're alone and you aren't getting enough love and attention from others.
8.	Hopelessness or Discouragement	You feel convinced that your problems will go on forever and that things will never improve. "I'll never get over this depression," or "I just can't lose weight and keep it off," or "I'll never find a good job," or "I'll be alone forever."

# Bill of Rights for Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents

## 1. The Right to Set Limits

I have the right to set limits on your hurtful or exploitative behavior.

I have the right to break off any interaction in which I feel pressured or coerced. I have the right to stop anything long before I feel exhausted.

I have the right to call a halt to any interaction I don't find enjoyable. I have the right to say no to anything without a good reason.

## 2. The Right Not to be Emotionally Coerced

I have the right to not be your rescuer.

I have the right to ask you to get help from someone else. I have the right to not fix your problems.

I have the right to let you manage your own self-esteem without my input. I have the right to let you manage your own distress.

I have the right to refuse to feel guilty.

## 3. The Right to Emotional Autonomy and Mental Freedom

I have the right to feel or think anything.

I have the right to no ridicule or mockery of my values, ideas, or interests.

## 4. The Right to Know How I Feel

I have the right to know whether I love you or not. I am not obligated to love you because you feel bad or I am related to you.

I have the right not to disconnect from myself to make things easier on others.

I have the right to be bothered by how I'm treated.

## 5. The Right to Clear Communications

I have the right to say anything as long as I do it in a non-violent, non-abusive way.

I have the right to ask to be listened to.

I have the right to speak up and tell you if my feelings are hurt.

I have the right to be told what you want from me without assuming I should know

## 6. The Right to Choose What's Best for Me

I have the right to leave whenever I want.

I have the right not to visit if it's not a good time for me.

I have the right to opt out of any activity or get-togethers I don't find enjoyable.

I have the right to make my own decisions, without self-doubt.

## 7. The Right to Live Life My Own Way

I have the right to take action even if you don't think it's a good idea.

I have the right to spend my energy and time on what I find important.

I have the right to trust my inner experiences, and take my aspirations seriously.

I have the right to take all the time I need, and not be rushed.

I have the right to refuse to feel shame.

### **8. The Right to Equal Importance and Respect**

I have the right to be considered just as important as you.

I have the right to live my life, and not be shamed by anyone.

I have the right to be treated respectfully as an independent adult.

### **9. The Right to Put My Own Health and Well-Being First**

I have the right to thrive, not just survive.

I have the right to take time for myself to do things I really enjoy.

I have the right to decide how much energy and attention I give to other people.

I have the right to take time to think things over.

### **10. The Right to Love and Protect Myself**

I have the right to self-compassion when I make mistakes.

I have the right to change my self-concept when it no longer fits.

I have the right to preserve the time and space necessary to nourish and protect my inner world.

I have the right to treat myself nicely and with loving-kindness.

I have the right to be free of self-criticism, and to fully accept my individuality.

I have the right to be me.