

FEELINGS AND FORGIVENESS LETTER

In this exercise, you are asked to write a letter of feelings and forgiveness to the perpetrator or other important people connected with your childhood abuse or neglect. You have been given this assignment because you have already done much hard work. You have been able to identify, verbalize, and work through many of your thoughts and feelings surrounding the childhood abuse or neglect. At this point, you are now much stronger emotionally and are ready to offer forgiveness to the perpetrator or significant others associated with your experiences of childhood abuse or neglect.

Before you begin to write the actual letter, please respond to the questions that follow. These questions will help you organize your thoughts and feelings before you write the letter to the perpetrator or significant others. You may find that some of the questions do not apply to you; therefore, leave these items blank. Space is also provided for you at the end of this assignment where you may express any additional thoughts or feelings you may want to include in your letter. Feel free to write down whatever thoughts or feelings come into your mind as you respond to these questions.

1. What impact has the experience of childhood trauma had on your life as an adult?

2. What feelings did you have as a child toward the perpetrator of the childhood abuse or neglect that you suffered?_____

3. How did the abuse or neglect make you feel about yourself as a child?_____

4. How do you feel about yourself as an adult now that you have worked through some of the pain associated with your childhood abuse or neglect? _____

5. What are your present feelings toward the perpetrator of your childhood abuse or neglect? _____

6. What are your feelings about other significant people in the family who witnessed the abuse or neglect but did nothing to stop it? _____

7. What changes have occurred within you that make it possible for you to consider forgiving the perpetrator or other significant persons? _____

8. What, if anything, has the perpetrator or other significant persons said or done that has allowed you to consider forgiveness of them? _____

9. Why are you choosing to begin the process of forgiveness toward the perpetrator or other significant others? _____

10. How would you characterize your present relationship with the perpetrator?

11. How would you characterize your relationship with other family members? _____

12. Use the following space to express any other thoughts or feelings that you have about your childhood trauma, yourself, the perpetrator, family members, or the future.

13. Review your responses to the questions and then write your letter on a separate piece of paper. Be sure to include your recollection of the facts of the abuse or neglect, how the experience made you feel as a child, how you feel toward yourself as an adult as a result of the trauma, how you have felt toward the perpetrator, your current reason for wanting to begin the process of forgiveness, and what type of relationship (if any) you see in the future with the perpetrator and other family members. Even if the perpetrator is deceased or unavailable for any relationship in the future, writing this letter can still be very beneficial in terms of your own growth and freedom from bitterness. Bring the completed letter to your next therapy session to review it with your therapist. You will have several options to consider about what you want to do with the letter: You may want to destroy it; you may want to save it; you may want to share the letter with the perpetrator or other significant persons through sending it or reading it to them in person. Your therapist can help you reach your decision about these options.

NEGATIVE THOUGHTS TRIGGER NEGATIVE FEELINGS

We used to believe that it was depression or anxiety that made people think negatively, but psychologists and psychiatrists have discovered that most people who struggle with anxious or depressed feelings first had negative, pessimistic, distorted thoughts that produced those feelings. People often have completely different reactions to the same situation. For example, John and Jack both heard their supervisor say to their production group, “We have to work harder and be more productive. Too much time is being wasted on trivial matters and we need to get focused.” John thinks, “The supervisor is trying to increase production and make us more efficient. I’d better do my part.” But Jack thinks, “The supervisor is blaming me for our low productivity numbers. I’m worried that I’m going to get fired. He never did like me.” Jack returns to work feeling depressed and anxious and his preoccupation with these negative feelings reduces his productivity. John, after hearing the same statement from the supervisor, returns to work more focused and confident that the situation can improve. The thoughts and interpretations that you make regarding a circumstance have a very strong influence on the feelings that are generated. Psychologists have identified several negative thinking patterns that are common to people who struggle with feelings of anxiety and depression. These distorted thinking patterns trigger the negative feelings and can lead to chronic states of depression and anxiety.

1. Study the following list of the types of negative thinking patterns that have been identified and defined. These distorted thinking patterns are common to people who suffer from depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

DISTORTED THINKING

Type	Definition	Example
Black or white	Viewing situations, people, or self as entirely bad or entirely good—nothing in between.	When Mary brought her vegetable salad to the neighborhood potluck, a hostess commented, “That’s our third salad.” Mary immediately thought, “She’s criticizing me. She doesn’t like me.”

Type	Definition	Example
Exaggerating	Making self-critical or other-critical statements that include terms like <i>never</i> , <i>nothing</i> , <i>everything</i> , or <i>always</i> .	Jack was accidentally overlooked when coworkers joined to make plans for lunch together. Jack thought, “They never ask me to do anything. Nobody wants me around here.”
Filtering	Ignoring the positive things that occur to and around self but focusing on and accentuating the negative.	Kate had her hair cut short and styled differently. After receiving several compliments from friends and family, one person was mildly critical. Kate thought, “I knew I shouldn’t have gotten it cut short. I look like a freak. People are laughing at me.”
Discounting	Rejecting positive experiences as not being important or meaningful.	Tyler was complimented by his boss for his good work on a project. He thought, “Anybody could have done that. She doesn’t know anything about this project and I didn’t do anything special with it.”
Catastrophizing	Blowing expected consequences out of proportion in a negative direction.	The teacher told Mary that her son was struggling a bit with math. Mary thought, “This is awful. Johnny is going to fail. I knew I should have worked with him more.”
Judging	Being critical of self or others with a heavy emphasis on the use of <i>should have</i> , <i>ought to</i> , <i>must</i> , <i>have to</i> , and <i>should not have</i> .	Jill made a sales presentation to a client. The client was very attentive and made comments about being impressed with the product. Jill thought, “He knows I stumbled over my words. I should have been more prepared. I have to be more relaxed or no client will ever buy from me.”

Type	Definition	Example
Mind reading	Making negative assumptions regarding other people's thoughts and motives.	Aaron inquired about a transfer to a new department. When he was told the position was already filled, he thought, "This manager never did like me. He knew I wanted that position but he just ignored me."
Forecasting	Predicting events will turn out badly.	Kelly just finished an important job interview. She immediately predicted that she would not get hired. "I'll never get this job. That interview was awful and I'm sure I blew it," she thought.
Feelings are facts	Because you feel a certain way, reality is seen as fitting that feeling.	Jim did not have plans for activity with any friends for the weekend. He felt lonely and inferior. He thought, "No one likes me. I have a terrible personality."
Labeling	Calling self or others a bad name when displeased with a behavior.	Joan had a disagreement with her friend about where to meet for lunch. Joan thought, "Betty is such a controller. She never listens to anyone and insists on always getting her own way."
Self-blaming	Holding self responsible for an outcome that was not completely under one's control.	Paula's friend had a minor traffic accident while she and Paula were riding to the mall. Paula thought, "This accident was my fault. I should not have been talking to Jackie while we were driving. Even though that other car hit us, I'm sure Jackie could have avoided it if I would have kept my mouth shut."

2. Apply these 11 common types of distorted thinking to your own way of thinking. List at least three examples of your own thoughts that have led you to feeling depressed and anxious. First, describe the event that prompted you to feel depressed and then describe the thoughts that promoted the bad feelings.

What Happened?**Negative Thoughts You Had**

A.	<hr/>	<hr/>
	<hr/>	<hr/>
B.	<hr/>	<hr/>
	<hr/>	<hr/>
C.	<hr/>	<hr/>
	<hr/>	<hr/>
D.	<hr/>	<hr/>
	<hr/>	<hr/>

3. It is important to try to replace negative, distorted thoughts with positive, more realistic thoughts that can help you feel happier. Refer to each of your examples listed in number 2 and write a positive thought that you could have used to make you feel better.

What Happened?**Replacement Positive Thoughts**

A.	<hr/>	<hr/>
	<hr/>	<hr/>
B.	<hr/>	<hr/>
	<hr/>	<hr/>
C.	<hr/>	<hr/>
	<hr/>	<hr/>
D.	<hr/>	<hr/>
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POSITIVE SELF-TALK

How soon we forget. This statement is especially true for people struggling with depression. They forget how to think positively and they forget about their worth as individuals, their contribution to society in general, and friends and family in particular. The cloud of depression blocks out the positive and distorts their vision into seeing themselves, the world, and their future as negative. This assignment is designed to help you break out of that self-defeating, unrealistic, negative thinking cycle. It will take effort and focused attention to break the bad habit of distorted thinking.

1. List five positive mood-enhancing statements regarding yourself (e.g., “I am a competent person who has had successes”), the world (e.g., “Other people are basically kind and want to be helpful”), and the future (e.g., “As I increase my activity, the future looks brighter”). You must force yourself to focus in on your successes, positive traits, the goodness of people, and an optimistic view of the future. Your tendency will be to think of failures and discount or ignore successes as well as seeing the future as hopeless. In other words, you must think contrary to your natural depressive inclination and return to the realistic, positive way of thinking that characterized you before bad habits got a stranglehold on your thoughts.

Positive View of Me

Positive View of the World

Positive View of the Future

2. Each day select one mood-enhancing thought from your lists and write it on a piece of paper to be posted somewhere in your house so that it will be easily visible (e.g., on the refrigerator, on a mirror).
3. Stand in front of a mirror each day for 3 minutes and look yourself in the eye while repeating the positive self-talk that you have written in item 1.
4. Explain the impact that the positive self-talk has had on your mood.

5. Rate the degree of improvement in your mood when you think positively versus when you think negatively.

1	2	3	4	5
No Impact		Moderate Impact		Great Impact

A-B-C Worksheet

Date: _____ Patient: _____

ACTIVATING EVENT

A

"Something happens."

BELIEF/STUCK POINT

B

"I tell myself something."

CONSEQUENCE

C

"I feel something."

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Are my thoughts above in “B” *realistic*?

What can you tell yourself on such occasions in the future?

Emotion Wheel III

Uncomfortable Emotions

