

Intro to CBT: Why Thoughts Matter

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Have you ever watched a movie that really made you feel something? Maybe you've felt fear while the camera creeps down a dark hallway, anger when the villain gets his way, or joy when everything turns out okay. It seems obvious that movies can make us feel... but why? *We* aren't creeping down a dark hallway, and the victory at the end isn't our own.

The answer is actually very simple. Being in a dark hallway does not cause fear. It's what you *think* about being in a dark hallway that causes fear. In short: Your thoughts have the power to control your emotions.

This is where cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) comes in. During CBT, you will learn to identify thinking patterns in your everyday life that are causing painful emotions or other problems. Then, by developing new thoughts, you will learn to change how you feel.

In this article, we'll dive deeper into thoughts, and the role they play in controlling emotions.

Introduction to Thoughts

It seems intuitive that *how you feel* is a result of the situations you face. If something “good” happens, you feel happy, excited, or proud. If something “bad” happens, you feel angry, sad, or worried.

Situation



Emotion

For example, imagine you are driving on the highway, and another vehicle cuts you off. As a result, you feel angry. It seems to make sense that you are angry because you were cut off.

Situation

getting cut off in traffic



Emotion

angry

However, if situations truly caused emotions, every person would react to the same situation in the same way. Of course, this is not the case. Some people become angry after being cut off in traffic, while others brush it off.

Why is it that two people in the same situation have different emotions?

The answer is that situations do not actually cause emotions. There’s a step in between that often goes unnoticed. It’s how you *interpret* or *think* about a situation that determines how you feel.

Situation



Thought



Emotion

Imagine two different people are cut off by hurried drivers, but they both have different *thoughts* about the situation:

Situation

getting cut off in traffic

Thought

That jerk only cares about themselves!

Thought

I wonder if they have an emergency?



Emotion

angry

Emotion

curious / concerned

As shown in the example, different thoughts lead to different emotions.

Note: If you were to draw these examples out further, you'd see that different emotions also lead to different behavioral responses. For example, the person who is angry might get home, and take out their frustration on their family. The person who is curious will quickly forget about the situation.

So, how does all of this happen without you even noticing it? The answer is something called *automatic thoughts*.

More Examples

Automatic Thoughts

Much of the time, thoughts are overlooked because they happen outside of your awareness. When you have the same thoughts over and over, your brain begins to tune them out. These are called **automatic thoughts**. Automatic thoughts are like a sound you can hear, but don't usually notice, such as the hum of a refrigerator.

To see automatic thoughts in action, think of something you do so frequently that it feels like second nature. For example, when you commute to work or school for the first time, you might need directions. But before long, it will seem as if you are travelling on autopilot. You don't look up directions or think about each turn—you just do it.

The brain's ability to run on "autopilot" is important, because it frees up resources for other tasks. But there's a downside, too. When thoughts happen

automatically, outside of your awareness, they aren't assessed for accuracy. Thoughts with inadequate evidence may be accepted as fact.

Irrational Thoughts

Another trick the brain uses to make sense of the world is *guessing*. Imagine you text a friend, and they don't answer for several hours. You don't know why they haven't responded, but your brain will probably try to guess. Your brain could guess something mundane, like: "They must be busy at work." Or it might guess something more extreme, like: "They must be angry at me."

Sometimes these guesses are accurate, but not always. When guesses lack evidence, they are called **irrational thoughts**.

Over time, even irrational thoughts can become automatic. This means thoughts and beliefs that are not true can shape how you feel, and how you behave, without you knowing.

Imagine a person who develops the automatic thought: "*People do not like me.*" This belief begins to color every situation. When a friend doesn't return a text message, it feels hurtful. When a stranger scowls at them in the grocery store, it feels personal. Even when they receive a compliment, it feels phony or insincere.



Emotion

upset

Situation

receive a compliment



Thought

People don't like me. They're probably being sarcastic.



Emotion

irritated

Of course, these interpretations of each situation aren't accurate. They're shaped by irrational thoughts that are happening automatically, outside of awareness.

One goal of CBT is to identify and challenge irrational thoughts. After challenging an irrational thought, you will learn to replace it with a new, rational thought.

Doing this will improve how you feel and how you act.

Situation

friend doesn't respond to my text message



Thought

I am likable. My friend must be busy.



Emotion

neutral

Situation

a stranger looks at me in the grocery store with a scowl



Thought

I am likable. Maybe they're having a bad day.



Emotion

neutral

Situation

receive a compliment



Thought

I am likable. That's a nice compliment.



Emotion

happy

By replacing irrational thoughts with rational alternatives, your feelings will better match the situation. Generally, this leads to healthier behaviors that result in better outcomes during everyday situations.

The importance of thoughts, and how they interact with feelings, is at the foundation of CBT. Going forward, you will learn to notice your thoughts as they're happening, evaluate them, and change thoughts that are irrational.