

Putting Thoughts on Trial - Webinar Transcript

NATASHA: Hi, everyone. I'm Natasha and I'm a counsellor here at George Brown College. Thanks for joining me for this webinar this morning. Today we're going to be talking about how you can cope with difficult thoughts and emotions. Our thoughts, our feelings, and our behaviours are all intimately intertwined. What this means is when we think certain thoughts, this contributes to the feelings that we feel, which then influences the behaviours that we engage in, which in turn reinforces the thoughts that we're thinking in some way, which will then influence our feelings. And it's all very circular ... it's a big cycle.

So this means that when you're struggling with your mental health or you're not feeling as well as you'd like to, there are three possible routes of intervention. You can target the emotion, you can find ways to soothe yourself. You can target the behaviour, so you can change behaviours that might be engaging in that might be exacerbating or contributing to the way you're feeling. Or you can target the thoughts. So you can look at the thoughts that you're thinking and see if there's any way that you can sort of challenge and systematically reframe the patterns of thinking that you're engaging in.

For the purpose of this webinar today, we're going to be talking about thoughts. So what you can do when you find yourself thinking in ways that are making you feel unwell.

The Negativity Bias

First I want to tell you about the negativity bias. So this is something that's common to all of us. We all have this negativity bias. It's hardwired into our brains and it's actually something that's really important for survival. So what the negativity bias is is the human inclination to place more stock in the negative. We spend more time thinking about negative or adverse events than we spend thinking about positive events. So what this might look like in practice is you come to school and, you know, perhaps you had a good sleep. You had a pretty neutral commute. You get to school. You had a good first period. You enjoyed your class. You learnt something new. But then over your lunch hour, a classmate makes a comment that makes you feel a bit small. And then you spend the next 24 hours stewing, sort of replaying that comment in your mind. And, you know, you get home and maybe your roommate or your parents ask you how your day was and you respond, it was horrible. I had a horrible day. And genuinely, in that moment, it feels like you had a horrible day. But if you were to, statistically, like, lay out all of the events and rate them as being positive, neutral, or negative, you'd find that, actually, there was really just one or two negative events that then you amplified in your mind. And this isn't a problem. This is, like I said, hardwired into the brain. It helps us stay alive. It our brain's mechanism for being alert to threat which, like, when you're out in the wild is really important. Right? You want to be constantly vigilant for something that could go wrong so that you can make sure that you stay safe. But when you're a student in the modern world, it's less helpful because there aren't really any imminent

threats to your survival. And so what this can end up looking like is feeling really low, feeling really anxious, in a way that's a disproportionate to reality.

What I'm hoping that you'll get out of this webinar today is a couple of strategies for you to start noticing these patterns of thinking that you may be engaging in ... and reframing them, if possible. So taking stock of some of the evidence and figuring out if there's an alternate perspective or an alternate way to view the situation that might not make you feel so low or anxious.

Common thinking traps

These are thinking traps that we all, at one time or another, will find ourselves engaging in. But people who are struggling with their mental health tend to engage in these sort of thinking traps more frequently. So a really big one that I hear all the time when I talk to students is this all or nothing/black and white thinking. What this sounds like is, "if I don't get straight As, then I've failed". Like, there's no point in even trying. This is perfectionism.

Disqualifying the positives. This is the negativity bias. This sounds like, "nothing ever goes right for me". And so, presumably, if you've been living in the world ... not saying that there haven't been some horrible things that may have happened to you, things that have really gone wrong in your life, but it's statistically improbable that nothing good has ever happened to you. Usually there are some good things that have happened, but it's really easy to miss them because our brains are wired to focus on threats or on negativity so it's really easy to miss the good stuff.

Labelling. So this is, like, "I'm so stupid. I'm a failure". It's personalizing or taking full responsibility for a situation. So instead of saying, maybe, "I failed that test", you'd say, you know, "I am a failure".

Should/must/ought. I often hear this in relation to how people are feeling. People will come in and then they'll say, you know, "I'm feeling so anxious, but I know I shouldn't be feeling this way. It's just college. Right?" And it invalidates or, like, minimizes your own experience. And when you do that, when you tell yourself that you should be feeling something other than what you're feeling, you get in your own way... and you close the door on problem solving. It's a lot more difficult for you to figure out, like, why exactly it is that you're feeling the way you're feeling and what you might need to do to feel a bit better.

Personalization. This is taking full responsibility for something that might not be entirely your fault. Not to say that you don't have a role in it, but not entirely your fault. So one that I hear all the time is challenges arising as a function of, like, stress related to the pandemic. So, you know, we're in this really weird space right now. We're in the middle of a global pandemic and students will come in and they'll say, you know, "I'm so stressed and I know I should just be able to, like, suck it up and do my work and be more motivated, but I'm not. And I know this is my fault". But the thing is ... it's not to

say that you don't have any responsibility. It's not to say that there's nothing you could be doing differently, but really, you know, we're in this really bizarre state of the world right now. And it's influencing all of our productivity and motivation levels to some degree. There's nothing wrong with you if you're finding it difficult to concentrate and generate motivation in the middle of the global pandemic.

So these are some common thinking traps, some sticky forms of thinking that tend to make us feel low or anxious. There are many other forms of thinking, but this is just an example of some of these types of thinking. So now let's talk about what you can do about it.

Noticing and challenging sticky thinking

So when you're targeting your thoughts, you're learning how to cultivate an inner narrative that is kinder and more self-compassionate. So the thing is, we all have an inner narrative, even if we're not aware of it. And what this means is, like, there are thoughts sort of happening, like, constantly, either subconsciously or consciously. And these thoughts are influencing the way that we feel and the way that we behave. And so when you start to intentionally become aware of what that inner narrative sounds like, it gives you a bit of control over what it is that you want to say to yourself. There are a lot of different ways that you can start cultivating a more compassionate inner narrative. Counselling can be one of them. Having conversations with loved ones or friends who are more compassionate towards you than you are towards yourself is another. But perhaps the most impactful and lasting thing that you can do is learn how to talk to yourself in a way that is kind and compassionate. And the reason this is so impactful is that it really gives you so much control over the trajectory of your feelings and behaviours. And it takes a lot of practice, so it's not like you can just snap your fingers and overnight, you know, you're starting to talk to yourself the way that you would talk to a loved one. But with practice, if you're able to cultivate a more compassionate inner narrative, then you really do empower yourself to feel better over the long term.

Here are some questions or talking points for you and yourself as you're reflecting inwards and trying to cultivate that compassionate inner narrative. So you find yourself engaging in these sticky patterns of thinking. You ask yourself, like, what are the facts? Where does this thought come from? Do I have any evidence that this thought might not be entirely true 100% of the time? What evidence supports the thought and what evidence contradicts it? Is there another way of viewing the situation? What would I say to a friend?

The thought record. You can also use a technique called the thought record. It's a guided journaling tool. And if this is something that you're interested in, just type "thought record" into Google and you'll get, like, a bunch of different and related templates. But it's a way for you to walk through when you're feeling a certain way what triggered the situation, all of the possible different thoughts that are being generated by those feelings, and that are probably contributing to those feelings. And then, you know, check the facts a bit. So look at the evidence that supports it and contradicts it. And it

also prompts you to consider alternative, more realistic, more balanced perspectives as well. So this can be a really useful way for you to check the facts on your own and for you to begin reframing some of those thoughts that might not be so balanced or helpful to you.

Disclaimer

So this is really important. People have a tendency to view their thoughts in a bit of binary, so to sort of think “I have positive thoughts and I have negative thoughts. And negative thoughts are bad and positive thoughts are good. And whenever I have a negative thought, I should be finding ways to think more positive”. And the tricky thing here is that oftentimes “negative thoughts” are actually quite helpful to us. Right? Like, our brains are wired to think in this way because we need to be able to consider that side of the coin. We need to be able to consider possible sources of danger or threats. And sometimes our negative thoughts are actually quite true. And all the time, no matter the situation, there's always a kernel of truth to our thoughts and our emotions. So it's not negative versus positive. It's like we've got positive on one side, negative on the other side of the spectrum. And what we're aiming for is reality. So we're not aiming for “positive thinking” because positive thinking is oftentimes just as distorted and unrealistic as negative thinking is. We're looking for reality. We're trying to find the middle path. And usually reality is some combination of positive and negative.

Next steps

If you're having a hard time distinguishing between which of your thoughts are helpful and which of your thoughts are unhelpful, please reach out to a professional. This is definitely something we can support you in. You can come see us at counselling, reach out to letstalk@georgebrown.ca to book an appointment. You can also call Good2Talk. If you Google Good2Talk Ontario, this is a help line that's free 24/7 for post-secondary students in Ontario. But you're not alone in this and definitely, if you're having a hard time figuring this out, it's really normal. These concepts are new to a lot of people.

Resources

So here's some resources, if this is something that piques your interest and you feel like you might want to learn a bit more. MindBeacon CBT is a really great online text-based CBT program that's free during COVID. BounceBack is always free, but I believe you do need a GP referral. And Mind Over Mood is a great self-help book based on some of the principles that I introduced you to today. So based on the idea that exerting some control over thoughts can then give us control over our feelings and behaviours. And then, of course, there's us. So you can always come into counselling and talk to us if you want to have a more fulsome conversation about these concepts.

Thanks so much for joining me for this webinar. I hope that it was helpful to you and I hope you learnt something new. And good luck as you start to cultivate a more compassionate inner narrative. Bye!