

Becoming Aware of Your Thoughts:

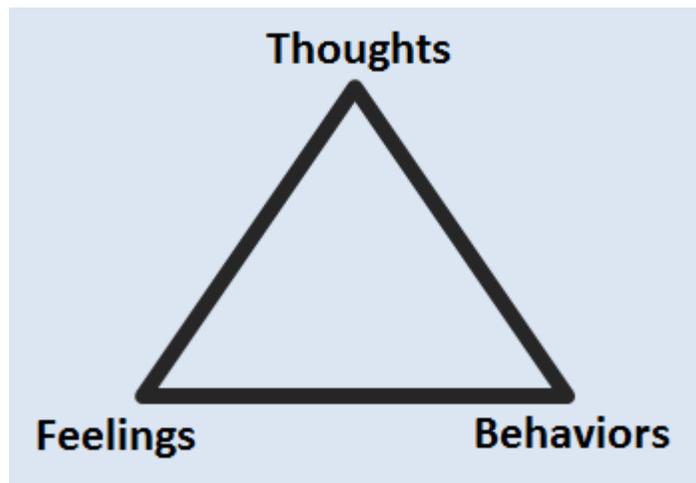
*Learning and harnessing the link between thoughts,
feelings, and behavior*

Homework Review:

- Signal breath practice
- Mood monitoring

Identifying Unhelpful Thoughts

When people feel stressed, they are often so overwhelmed that they don't notice the thoughts they're having, and these thoughts can make them feel even worse. How we think and feel then impacts our behavior.



Luckily, you can learn to “catch” your automatic thoughts and replace them with more helpful thoughts, which can change both your mood and your behavior. Let's start by distinguishing between a **thought** and a **feeling**.

I am a bad caregiver.	Thought	Feeling
I don't know what I'm doing.	Thought	Feeling
I feel guilty.	Thought	Feeling

Consider what happens when you're listening to music with headphones.

- If the headphones themselves are clear, positioned securely on your head, and plugged in correctly, the music will come through clearly.
- If the headphones are broken or not being used properly, you may mishear or misinterpret the music.

The same is true for the way we interpret situations around us and conversations we have with others. Our interpretation of these events happens through our own personal "headphones," or a set of thoughts that help us make sense of the world. When we are stressed or frustrated, our headphones are tuned to a negative signal that interprets situations in a negative way.

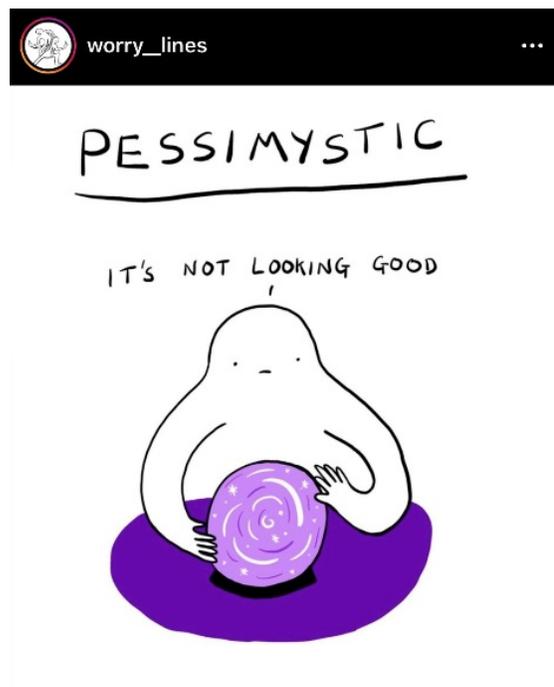
As you begin to identify and examine the unhelpful thoughts you have, you may start to notice patterns both in the types of thoughts you have, as well as in the situations that tend to be more difficult for you. We may even go so far as to say that you have a particular manner or style to the way you interpret stressful situations.

Styles of Thinking

Below is a list of negative thought patterns, or cognitive distortions, that are common among caregivers.

1. **Name calling:** attaching a blanket, negative label to yourself or to others (ie: “I’m a bad caregiver” or “My husband is an idiot”)
2. **Tyranny of the Shoulds:** This refers to the rules you have about the way things “should” be. They are often unrealistic expectations that result in strong feelings of guilt and anxiety when not met (ie: “I should have a clean house before I can do anything for myself” or “a good caregiver should keep their spouse at home for the duration of their illness”).
3. **This or That:** This refers to viewing a situation only in terms of extreme outcomes. You see your choice of outcomes as either-or, with no room for the options that fall in the middle (ie: I’m either a total success, or a total failure”). People who think this way tend to over-use words like “always” and “never.”
4. **Personalization:** You assume that others have negative intentions towards you or negative views of you. For example, if a friend cancels a coffee date, you assume she is doing so because she no longer likes you.
5. **Generalization:** You overinterpret situations, drawing conclusions based on few facts. For example, your care-recipient is moody in the morning, so you immediately interpret that it will be a bad day.
6. **If only:** You spend a lot of time thinking of past events wishing you had acted differently. Some people tend to take this a step further and engage in “magical thinking” (ie: “If I hadn’t bragged about what a great marriage I had, my husband wouldn’t have gotten sick”).

7. **What's the Use:** This pattern of thinking is common for people who believe that their thoughts or behaviors are not effective in changing their situation, which leads to feelings of hopelessness (ie: “Whenever I plan an outing for myself it never goes as planned – why try at all?”)
8. **Emotional Reasoning:** You use your feelings as the basis for the facts of the situation (ie: “I am angry with my husband, and therefore I am a bad wife”).
9. **Fallacy of Change:** You expect that one specific change (that is often not realistic) will make everything better (ie: “If I could just get my husband to admit he has dementia, I wouldn't be having such a hard time.”).



An Example

David is caring for his wife, Molly, who has Alzheimer's Disease. He recently retired and is now a full-time caregiver. One day, David needs to go to the mall to run an errand and decides to take Molly with him. However, once he gets there, he realizes he needs to use the bathroom. He sits Molly down on a bench outside the bathroom door and says "please sit here for just a few minutes – I'll be right back out." When he returns, Molly is missing. David is anxious and scared and runs up and down the length of the mall looking for her. After a few minutes, he finds her in a shoe store chatting with a salesperson and trying on shoes. After his initial relief, David thinks, "why won't Molly listen to me? I'm trying the best I can and she won't even acknowledge how hard this is for me. In fact, she's actively working against me. Now everyone in the mall knows I'm not a dependable caregiver. I guess this is the end of our public outings together." David then feels angry, frustrated, embarrassed, and trapped.

Taking Stock of Unhelpful Thoughts

The first three steps to changing your unhelpful thoughts are:

Step A: Take note of the situation and what happened prior to the thought.

Step B: Identify the automatic thoughts in the situation.

Step C: Identify the feelings you had in the moment.

Try to note **A, B, and C** without assigning judgment to them, or trying to change them (yet). Consider them to simply be data – you cannot make changes in your mood without correctly identifying what you want to change. We will then organize these three items into a chart, called a thought record. Here is an example of David’s thought record:

Situation (A)	Thoughts (B)	Feelings (C)
Molly got lost in the mall after David told her to stay put.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Molly refuses to listen to me even though she can• Molly doesn't appreciate all that I'm doing for her and has no idea how hard this is on me• I am not a dependable caregiver and everyone at the mall knows it• I can never take her anywhere again	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Angry• Frustrated• Scared• Embarrassed• Stuck

Activity

Think about a difficult caregiving situation you may have encountered in the past few weeks. Complete the thought record below.

Situation (A)	Thoughts (B)	Feelings (C)

10 Techniques for Challenging & Replacing Unhelpful Thoughts

The more you practice challenging your thoughts, the easier it will become. Here are some techniques to try, using the example of Molly and David.

- 1. Look at it from a different point of view:** Talk to yourself as if someone who cares about you is talking about you. David may ask himself, “how would my best friend James view this situation, and what would he say to me?”
- 2. Take action/ask others:** Some caregivers find it helpful to gather more information to challenge their unhelpful thoughts. In our example, David could challenge his thought about “not being a dependable caregiver” by talking to other caregivers he knows. Could David also ask them how they handle using the bathroom when out with their relative?
- 3. Change how you talk to yourself:** We often create negative labels for others or ourselves without realizing what we are doing. We also may believe that we *must* behave, think, or feel a certain way. Changing the negative to positive or harshness to compassion can help you see the situation from a different point of view. If David tried to think about what his label of “not being a dependable caregiver” really meant, he would discover that he could not possibly fit that definition.
- 4. Don’t jump to conclusions:** Remind yourself to think of different possible explanations for others’ behavior. You may be basing your predictions on very little information. Should David automatically assume that because the stranger in the mall asked how he was doing,

she must be passing judgment on his ability as a caregiver? What could have been her other motives?

5. **Consider Alternatives and In-betweens:** When people think of only the extreme outcomes of situations, scores of alternatives get ignored. Think of a ruler that has a 0 at one end, and 12 inches at the other – there are lots of inch markers in-between. Can David really *never* take Molly out of the house again, or can he test out smaller, less public outings?
6. **Scale Technique:** This technique works well when you are “stuck” on a particular thought or feeling and want to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of maintaining the thought (or emotion, or behavior). What are the advantages of David’s belief that he can never take Molly to the mall again, and what are the disadvantages?

ADVANTAGES

This style of thinking is comfortable – I don’t have to challenge myself

DISADVANTAGES

Feeling stuck and socially isolated

Hopelessness

Anger

7. **Credit Positives:** Focusing on your stress and frustration is a constant pull for negative interpretations and prevents us from remembering that positive events, thoughts, and feelings do occur. Spend a few moments thinking of more pleasant outcomes of events, positive thoughts you’ve had, and the positive emotional consequences that result. For example, David might think, “that was scary, but I

managed to rectify the situation and everyone is safe - now I know what to expect during future outings.” Or even “I haven’t seen Molly engage with a stranger like that in forever. It was nice to see her interested in something.”

8. **Thought Stopping/Substitution:** This technique is helpful for people who find it hard to extinguish a particular negative thought. When you find yourself repeating the thought over and over, try forcefully saying “STOP!” to yourself out loud, and replacing it with positive self-talk. Later that night, David may be lying in bed thinking on an endless loop, “I’m a bad caregiver.” He could say “STOP! I’m putting a lot of effort into learning how to do this, and I’m proud of myself for that.”



9. **Worry Time:** Sometimes people just need to worry to get a thought out of their system. Worry time is a scheduled time during the day to focus on your worrying. When worries come up at other times, write them down on a “worry list” and tell yourself, “I can think about that later.” When you get to your scheduled worry time, set a timer for 10 or 15 minutes and plan to do something else when the timer goes off. Spend the time really focusing on the worries on your list.

Challenging and Replacing Thoughts

Now we're going to transition from a 3 column thought record to a 6 column thought record. The additional steps we're adding are:

Step D: Challenge and replace your unhelpful thoughts with more helpful thoughts.

Step E: Describe the new feelings you have as a result of thinking about the situation differently.

Step F: Describe how your behavior may be different now that your thoughts and feelings have changed.

Debate (D)	Emotion Change (E)	Functional Change (F)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I've never done this before – how could I have anticipated this? Next time I'll be more prepared. • This has happened to most caregivers at one point or another. It doesn't make me a bad caregiver. • Molly is not actively working against me – she couldn't remember that I asked her to stay put. It's not her fault • Onlookers at the mall were probably just concerned for me – not judging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less frustrated • Less angry at Molly, but angry at the disease • More hopeful • Proud of myself • Sad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Next time I'll find a family restroom where I can keep an eye on Molly, or maybe I'll bring a third person with us to the mall • Maybe the mall is not the best outing for Molly. I'll think of something else. • I'll try to think of an activity that involves shoes. I always forget that Molly loves her shoe collection.

Activity

Complete a 6 column thought record about the situation you wrote down earlier.

A	B	C	D	E	F

How Life Activities Affect Your Mood

All of our lives are made up of both pleasant and unpleasant activities, which can control how up or down we feel. For example, you might spend the morning having coffee with a friend, but then come home to do chores around the house and pay your bills. Unfortunately, many aspects of caregiving are unpleasant and not within our control. We can't change that, but we **can** make choices to incorporate more pleasant activities to counterbalance the others, and reintroduce a sense of control and mastery.

Many caregivers struggle with this because of a lack of:

- Time
- Money
- Respite care
- Emotional support
- Control over a relative's symptoms or progression

And this in turn can lead to:

- Burnout
- Frustration
- Anger
- Loss of identity

Remember: caring for yourself is a skill that takes practice. It might not come easily, and it may take a while to develop the habit of incorporating these activities into your daily life.

What Counts as a Pleasant Activity?

Pleasant activities don't have to be big events that require a lot of planning. They can be small things you do on your own, with friends, or with the person you're caring for. Some examples are reading, going for a walk, or listening to music. Even though these activities may last only 15 minutes, taking this time out for yourself is important for your well-being.

Key points:

- Anything you like to do is a pleasant activity if it is consciously chosen and deliberately done.
- Even activities such as chores can be turned into pleasant activities if you take to the task with a calm attitude and look for enjoyable features of them (ie: listening to a favorite podcast while you do the dishes)
- Taking the time to enjoy yourself will help you feel less stressed, and be a better caregiver
- **4 pleasant activities a day keep the doctor away.**

Identifying Pleasant Activities

- **Start small and be simple:** Choose activities that you can do every day, or a few times per week.
- **Choose activities that you can do anywhere, and that don't require a lot of planning:** You can listen to music or call a friend from most places.
- **Adapt activities that are too involved:** You may enjoy traveling, but realistically you can't take a trip every day. Instead, could you walk around a new neighborhood, or plan a future day trip?
- **Choose activities you can increase:** It feels good to track progress.

Some examples of pleasant activities are:

- Take a long bath or shower
- Set a timer and put your phone away while you read a book, the newspaper, or a magazine
- Go to an exercise class or do a video at home
- Take a “mindful walk”
- Visit a museum
- Stretch
- Meditate
- Treat yourself to a cup of coffee or meal out of the house
- Garden
- Watch your favorite TV show or movie

My Pleasant Activity List

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

Relaxation Exercise: The 20 Breaths Practice

The 20 Breaths practice helps you to create a powerful moment of stillness and silence in the middle of activity and stress. The 20 Breaths exercise requires practice and rewards persistence. If you stay with it, and especially when you practice even if you think you are too busy or distracted, you are guaranteed to learn from it. You will discover for yourself that your own natural resources are never farther away than your next breath.

Here are some suggestions to make this practice work for you:

1. Come to a **full stop** at the beginning. Deliberately stop everything else that you are doing. The practice only lasts a few minutes, so give it your full attention. If you don't, it will be over before you really start!
2. **One breath at a time.** You are really practicing 20 very short moments of mindfulness. Each session only lasts for the duration of one breath, about 5 or 10 seconds. Every breath is different. Each one is short enough for you to devote yourself to it fully. Don't worry about what happened during the last breath, or what will come next. See if you can bring your full attention to the breath that is alive right now. You will notice, of course, that your mind wanders into the past and future. That is not a problem; it is how you learn about practicing mindfulness. Just don't wander away completely. Simply notice it and gently return to the moment of breath that is here. If you completely miss one breath (or 10), don't worry. Another is about to begin.
3. **Full attention.** See if you can bring all of your attention to the present moment of breath. You are bringing your full awareness to meet the breath. Each time you notice that some of your attention is elsewhere, see if you can bring that part of attention back to meet the next breath. Notice distractions, not to fight with them, but because once you notice them you will have the opportunity to undo them in the next moment. Distractions are opportunities. Once we notice them, they will show us how to return to the present moment.
4. **Let go completely** at the end of each breath. Give yourself a moment to completely relax, release, let go. Count the breath in that moment.
5. **Take a fresh start** when the next breath begins. This breath is new, never before experienced. Catch it while it is fresh, right at the moment when it arises. See if you can find that moment, the exact spot where the present is found.
6. **Rest for at least a few moments** at the end of the practice. If you can, schedule each 20 Breaths practice to last for five minutes. During the last minute or two, after you've finished the counting, sit and rest gently with the continuous flow of the breath. Pause for a moment after you open your eyes, sense the body and the breath, and notice the world around you.
7. The present moment is the only moment of your life that you can ever actually know. View this practice as a way to rediscover the moments that join to build your life.

- From the Penn Program for Mindfulness

