

Identifying and challenging cognitions and beliefs

Why are my thoughts important?

Whether we realise it or not we think all day long. It has been estimated that an average person has around **70000 thoughts every day**. Many of these thoughts help us feel confident about ourselves as we move through the world; but some do not. What's more, thoughts can be heavily affected by other things in life, like our emotions and our physical states.

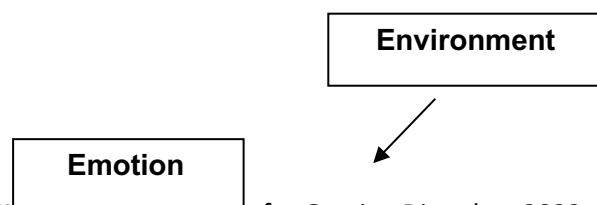
For example, when people feel frightened or unhappy parts of the brain stop working and thoughts can become unbalanced. In this scenario thoughts can be said to be inaccurate or unhelpful. Realising that some thoughts may be wrong is an important step towards more healthy thinking styles.

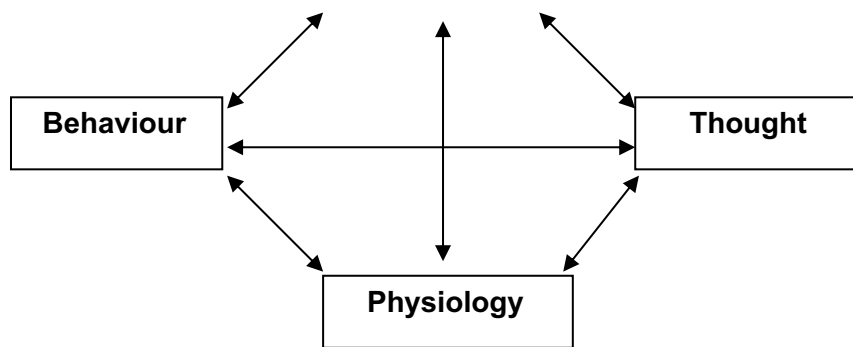
The first step in learning how to challenge your thoughts is to learn how to identify them.

How do thoughts interact with emotions, behaviours and the body?

In CBT four things are seen as capturing how a person functions on a daily basis. These are thoughts, emotions, behaviours and physiology. We obviously think, feel and behave all the time but we also have a physical system, a physiology, which underpins these activities.

These four factors do not exist independently of each other; they function as part of a system. This system can be pictorially represented in the form of a 'donut' shape, as shown below.





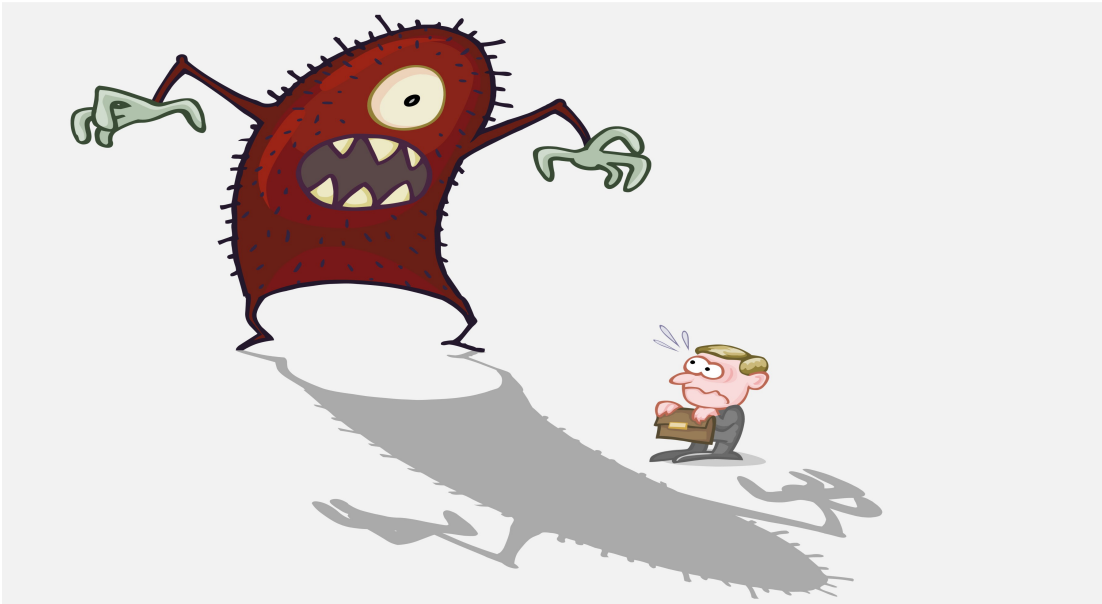
A **maintenance cycle** is a way of looking at how what we do affects our feelings and thoughts, and how the way we think can affect the way we feel and behave. The maintenance cycle shows how the way we think, feel and behave are linked. If we have thoughts that are critical it can make us sad and upset, and we might start to feel bad about ourselves.

If we feel bad about ourselves we might start to think that we are worthless, and that other people do not like us. This might cause us to stay away from people because we think that they don't like us, and therefore we could become isolated. This cycle continues because isolating ourselves may lead to further feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem.

The interactions between these factors are not always things we are consciously aware of. As an example, after gaming you will most likely experience particular thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, which work together to influence what actions you decide to take next.

Challenging beliefs

Most of the time we walk around unaware that our thoughts are narrating everything that's happening. We are focused on what we're doing, what happened yesterday or what's happening later. If you can spot unhelpful thoughts you then have the option to challenge and question them. Your goal here is to view your thoughts as simply words or ideas being given to you by some character in your brain. Each of us has "**an inner critic**" that sits in the corner of our mind that tries to bully us with unhelpful negative messages. The best thing we can do is to learn to recognise that those messages come from the critic, not from your true self. Beliefs take time to change. This means you will have to keep challenging those beliefs and introduce new, more helpful beliefs to focus your energy on.

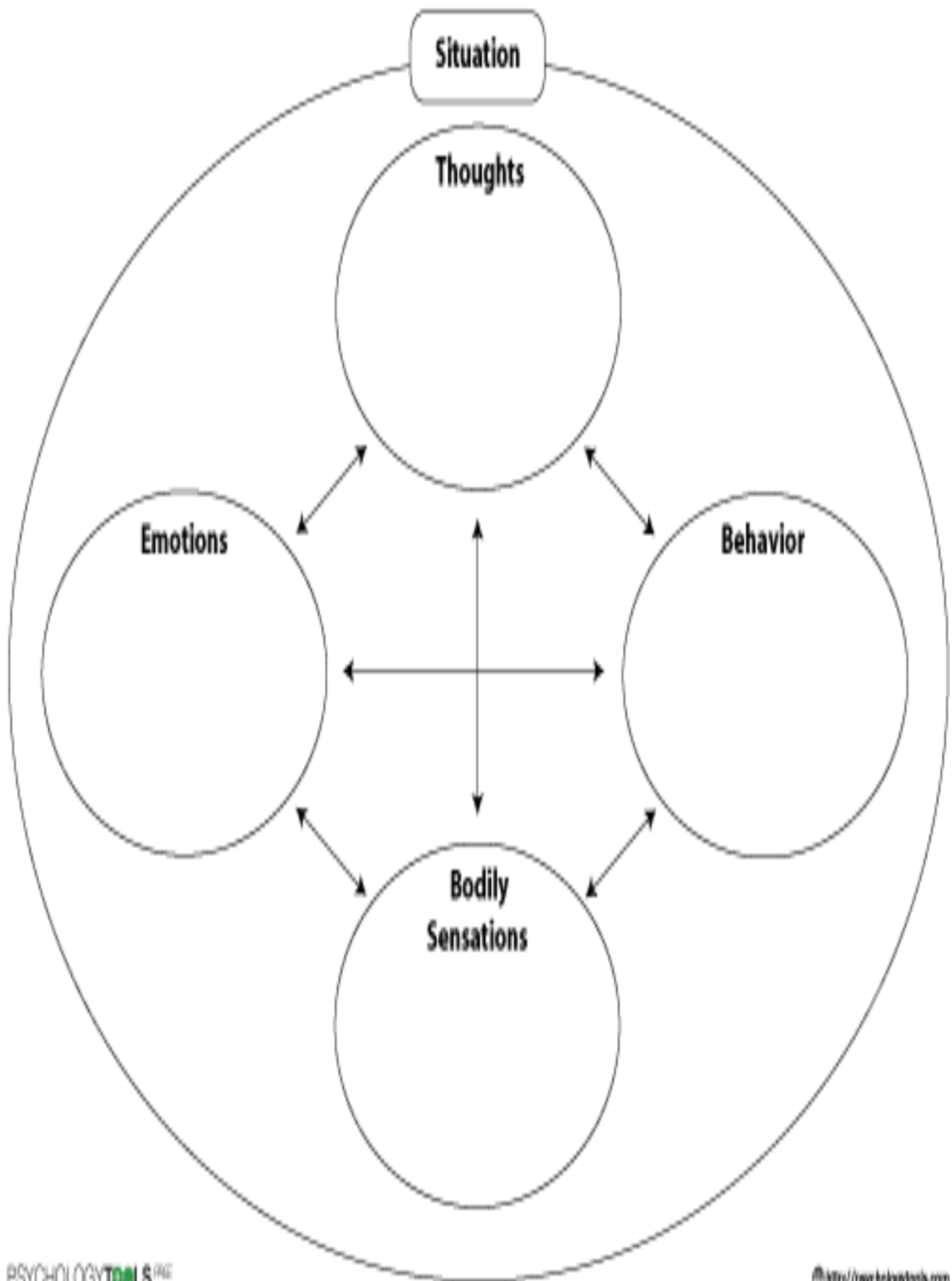


Core beliefs

In the first few years of life, we develop core beliefs that guide how we understand ourselves, other people and the world. Core beliefs develop early in life and are usually shaped by significant events. For example if a child is punished whenever he makes a mistake, he might develop the core belief “I am a failure” or “I am bad”. Throughout life he might work hard to be perfect at everything-or alternatively give up easily if he is afraid he won’t do well.

Core beliefs are stored unconsciously and have been engrained so deeply in our minds for so long that we tend to assume that they are the absolute truth. This makes it hard to see when core beliefs are not accurate or to change them.

Cross Sectional Formulation



Unhelpful Thinking Styles

All or nothing thinking



Sometimes called 'black and white thinking'

If I'm not perfect I have failed

Either I do it right or not at all

Over-generalizing

"everything is always rubbish"
"nothing good ever happens"

Seeing a pattern based upon a single event, or being overly broad in the conclusions we draw

Mental filter



Only paying attention to certain types of evidence

Noticing our failures but not seeing our successes

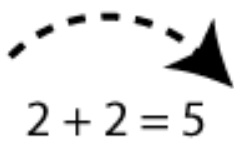
Disqualifying the positive



Discounting the good things that have happened or that you have done for some reason or another

That doesn't count

Jumping to conclusions



There are two key types of jumping to conclusions:

- **Mind reading** (imagining we know what others are thinking)
- **Fortune telling** (predicting the future)

Magnification (catastrophising) & minimization



Blowing things out of proportion (catastrophizing), or inappropriately shrinking something to make it seem less important

Emotional reasoning



Assuming that because we feel a certain way what we think must be true

I feel embarrassed so I must be an idiot

should
must

Using critical words like 'should', 'must', or 'ought' can make us feel guilty, or like we have already failed

If we apply 'shoulds' to other people the result is often frustration

Labelling



Assigning labels to ourselves or other people

I'm a loser
I'm completely useless
They're such an idiot

Personalization

"this is my fault"

Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault

Conversely, blaming other people for something that was your fault

The Court Case



Write down your thought/s – put the really troublesome thought (not you!) in the “dock”, the thought that makes you feel really bad or upset. (To help identify this thought, ask yourself questions such as: What’s the worst that could happen? What does that say about me?)

Look for evidence to support the accuracy of the thoughts – what tells you this thought is true? What would a barrister / lawyer / advocate for the defence say? (Remember this is a “court case” and evidence should be able to stand up in court as facts)



Look for evidence against the thoughts – what tells you this thought is not totally true, all of the time? Is this opinion rather than fact? What would a barrister / lawyer / advocate for the prosecution say? What factual evidence is there? Consider what others would say (witnesses) etc.

Sum up all the evidence and come to your own conclusions – find a closing statement that is based on the evidence, that is realistic, rational and balanced. Rephrase the original thought in a way that includes the evidence. (You might start with: “Even though I.....”)



Strategies for taking the sting out of thoughts

- Practice saying “my mind is telling me that.....” in front of the upsetting thought
- Say the first word of the thought over and over, 30 times. Notice how it starts to sound like gibberish. Do this with each word in the thought until it all sounds like nonsense.
- Pick a cartoon character with a goofy voice and say that the thought to yourself in that characters voice.
- Sing the thought to the tune of your favourite song



Homework for this session:

Complete the diary including *thoughts column*