



How to recognise and challenge unhelpful thoughts

How we think about things can have a big effect on our feelings and how we behave.

Our thoughts and beliefs often come from things that have happened in the past and can be helpful or unhelpful. Unhelpful thoughts and beliefs may make us feel worthless, sad, stressed, angry or anxious. These unhelpful thoughts and feelings can lead us to behave in unhelpful ways. Unhelpful thoughts can lead to craving – and giving in to that craving.

For example

Activating situation:

After a hard day at work, you are feeling tired and stressed.

Some common unhelpful ways of thinking include:

- Extremes – either something is all good or all bad. For example:
 - “I made a mistake so I am a stupid person who can’t do anything right”
 - “I had one argument with my partner so I am a bad partner”
 - “I used once this week, I am a failure who can’t change – it’s hopeless”
- Over generalising – assuming that if something bad has happened in the past it will always happen – forgetting the times when it didn’t; or thinking that because one person didn’t like you that nobody does. For example:
 - “I can’t trust anybody, people always let you down”
 - “I always lose”, “I never get anything right”
 - “Everyone thinks I am an idiot”
- Catastrophizing – imagining the worst-case scenario. For example:

“I have a headache, I must have a brain tumour”

“I’ll never get a job, I will end up living on the street”

- Mistaking feelings for facts – just because you feel something it doesn’t mean it is true. For example:

“I feel like a failure so I am a failure”

- Minimising your good qualities. For example:

“I’m not clever, I was just lucky when I did well”.

- Demands – should, ought, must – for example:

“I ought to feel happy all the time”

“I must do things perfectly every time”

“Everyone should treat me with respect at all times”

- Personalising – blaming yourself for unpleasant events and other people’s feelings and behaviours. For example;

“It is all my fault that my friend didn’t enjoy the party, I must have done something wrong”

- Jumping to conclusions – mindreading. For example:

“I won’t try to do that because I know I will fail”

“I saw my friends across the road and waved but they didn’t wave back, they must hate me”

Unhelpful beliefs	Helpful beliefs
I shouldn’t have to put up with feeling stressed. I can’t cope without using.	I am feeling tired and stressed right now. I would like to use. I’m going for a walk and I know I will feel better after dinner and a good night’s sleep.
Consequences	Consequences
Feel hopeless about giving up and decide to use the substance	Feel determined and proud and decide not to use the substance. Going over to visit my folks.

You can use the ABCDs to help you challenge your unhelpful thoughts and beliefs.

Activating event or situation – what is the situation?

Beliefs – what were your thoughts when the event was happening?

Consequences – How did you end up feeling and what did you end up doing? What happened?

Disputing – are your beliefs true? What other explanations might there be? What evidence do you have for your thoughts? Is there another way you could think about this? What would be a more helpful thought?

When you have disputed your unhelpful thoughts write down your new helpful thought.

Example:

Activating event	Beliefs	Consequences	Disputing
My friends said they couldn't come over to my house today.	They think I am boring, they don't like me now that I am not using.	I feel worthless and upset and hopeless about giving up using. I decide to use.	They might be really busy today. They don't have transport today and can't get here. They are sick with a cold and don't want to give it to me. Maybe this is a good opportunity to avoid using tonight and getting in a mess.

It is important to practice your ABCDs regularly to help you recognize and challenge unhelpful thoughts.

Now that you know how to challenge unhelpful thoughts, here are some related sheets that you might also find useful:

[How to cope with cravings](#)

[How to be assertive](#)

[How to handle high-risk situations](#)

[How to prepare for and respond to a slip](#)

[How to manage a slip](#)

[How to practice mindfulness](#)



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