

The Stages of Cognitive Restructuring

Cognitive Restructuring usually utilises a Thought diary to collect and write down your thoughts.

There are 3 stages to cognitive restructuring.

Firstly, you need to identify exactly what the content of your unhelpful thoughts are.

Secondly, you do something to help you examine the thought more objectively. Sometimes this includes collecting 'evidence' as to how accurate the thought really is.

Finally, you reconsider the thought in light of the evidence you have collected. You can then put the thought into perspective.

When I might fill out a Thought Record Diary

When you feel a strong difficult emotion such as sadness, depression or anger it can be good to consider writing a thought record diary. Equally if you just seem to have lots of thoughts buzzing around in your mind. You can also use a Thought Record Diary for a situation that occurred previously, whether just last week or 10 years ago.

Stage 1

Write down in the first column of your Thought diary a brief description of the situation where the thought occurred. You should write down where you were, what you were doing, when it was and who with.

In the second column write down the feelings you had. This may be sad, hurt, rejected, anxious or angry. The more feelings you can recognise experiencing, the more you can make sense of the effect of each particular thought upon your emotions.

Also record how intense that feeling was on a scale between 1 –100 percent. 1 percent is not at all, 100 percent is the most intense it could be.

In the third column write down exactly what your thought was and how much you believe that thought to be true. Here 1 percent is 'I do not believe this at all', 100 percent is 'I totally believe this thought'. It might help with this to imagine your thoughts like a movie. A series of images and things you might say to yourself about a future scenario, perhaps about the past or about yourself. The idea is to capture what is going on/ being said in this movie.

In the beginning, ignore the last two columns. It is suggested that you should collect your thoughts for a couple of weeks to firstly become more aware of your thinking.

It is most beneficial to use these Diaries with some support from a professional, at least at first to give help and guidance on the process. However, you can also work on them alone if the opportunity for support is not currently available.

It can be useful to see which thoughts trigger which emotions, and to look for other patterns in our thinking.

Stage 2

Stage 2 is about collecting some kind of evidence to see if your thought is accurate or not. There are many ways to collect evidence.

From the thoughts you have collected in stage 1, we start to pick one that tends to be a more frequent thought, or one that has an emotional intensity about it to then begin to examine in more detail.

We call this a 'hot thought'.

The 'hot thought' will usually have a belief rating at least 60 percent and causes distressing emotions. Write the hot thought down on top of the Evidence table (on page 2 of the Thought Record Diary). Add in your percentage rating of how much you believe it. In the Evidence table, one column is labelled Evidence for and one is labelled Evidence against.

Next, imagine that you are the judge in a court where the evidence for and against the truth of your thought is being examined. Write down the evidence for and against the thought being true. Remember that you are the judge and you need to present the full picture so that a fair decision can be made.

Sometimes people find this quite difficult. People particularly find it difficult to come up with evidence that the thought is not true. To help you to give your thought a 'fair trial' use some of the following questions:

If my best friend or partner were giving evidence, what would they say for and against this thought?

If you rate the belief in your thought as 75 percent, then there is 25 percent of the thought you do not believe to be true. Ask yourself what makes up that 25 percent.

Stage 3

Now you need to reconsider the thought in light of the evidence you have collected. You may find you are able to come up with a revised thought. Use the fourth column of the thought diary to write down this new thought. You should also rate how much you believe the revised thought.

In the final column rate your feelings again using the same 0-100 percent scale. Notice how by changing your thought, your mood has also changed. In this the way you can begin to see how cognitive restructuring can really work to change the way you feel.