

CREATING SAFETY A trauma information and self-help course for survivors of sexual violence

Week 2

Unhelpful / Helpful Thinking Habits

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Week two introduces the idea of thinking which is unhelpful and tends to restrict us and thinking which helps us to feel more positive and see more choices, and gives an exercise to help us start to identify this for ourselves.

It introduces the importance of self-compassion and gives the 'self compassion break' as an exercise to try.

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Unhelpful Thinking Habits

Having experienced the overwhelming trauma of sexual abuse or sexual assault can make us more prone to having unhelpful thinking habits.

This is very understandable - we have been overwhelmed and powerless, and may have been told very negative things about ourselves and other people.

We can start to identify habits of thinking which don't help us, which keep us feeling small, feeling worthless, and feeling like we don't have choices.

Becoming aware of these patterns takes time and is likely to happen in lots of very small steps with many setbacks.

We can also start to learn about more helpful and realistic ways of thinking which support us to feel bigger, to feel like we have choices, to build healthy connections and feel good about ourselves.

This is likely to be a long process and each tiny step is important!

Unhelpful Thinking

Mental Filter

When we notice only what the filter allows us to notice, and we dismiss anything that doesn't 'fit'. Like looking through dark blinkers or 'gloomy specs', or only catching the negative stuff in our sponges, whilst anything more positive or realistic is sieved, ignored, dismissed or we make excuses for

Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Am I filtering out the positives? Am I wearing those 'gloomy specs'? What would be more realistic? What am I sponging, what am I sieving?

Mind-Reading

Assuming we know what others are thinking (usually about us)

Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Is there another, more balanced way of looking at it?



Prediction

Believing we know what's going to happen in the future. *Am I thinking that I can predict the future? How likely is it that that might really happen?*

Compare and despair

Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others, and comparing ourselves negatively against them

Am I doing that 'compare and despair' thing? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at it?

Critical self

Putting ourselves down, self-criticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not totally our responsibility

There I go, that internal bully's at it again. Would most people who really know me say that about me? Is this something that I am totally responsible for?



Shoulds and musts

Thinking or saying 'I should' (or shouldn't) and 'I must' puts pressure on ourselves, and sets up unrealistic expectations. *Am I putting more pressure on myself, setting up expectations of myself that are almost impossible? What would be more realistic?*

Catastrophising

Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen

OK, thinking that the worst possible thing will definitely happen isn't really helpful right now. What's most likely to happen?

Emotional Reasoning

I feel bad so it must be bad! I feel anxious so I must be in danger

Just because it feels bad, doesn't necessary mean it is bad. My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts – and thoughts are just automatic brain reflexes

Mountains and Molehills

Exaggerating the risk of danger, or the negatives. Minimising the odds of how things are most likely to turn out, or minimising positives

Am I exaggerating the risk of danger, and minimising the evidence that it's most likely to be okay? Or am I exaggerating the negative and minimising the positives? How would someone else see it? What's the bigger picture?



Evaluations / Judgements

Making judgements about events, ourselves, others, or the world, rather than describing what we actually see and have evidence for

I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgements are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?

Black and white thinking

Believing that something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in-between or 'shades of grey'

Things aren't either totally white or totally black – there are shades of grey. Where is this on the spectrum?



Memories

Current situations and events can trigger upsetting memories, leading us to believe that the danger is here and now, rather than in the past, causing us distress right now

This is just a reminder of the past. That was then, and this is now. Even though this memory makes me feel upset, it's not actually happening again right now.

Helpful Alternatives Worksheet

Unhelpful Thinking Habit	Examples of my thoughts when this habit takes hold. What am I doing/ what is happening when these thoughts take hold?	Alternative Thoughts. What helps me to think in a more helpful way? What am I doing when I manage to think in a more helpful way?
Negative mental filter		
Thinking that I can mind-read		
Compare and despair		
Critical self		
Shoulds and musts		
Judgements		
Emotional reasoning		
Mountains and Molehills		
Catastrophising		
Black and White Thinking		
Memories		

Self-Compassion

“Survivors of abuse and trauma need to focus on developing self compassion, far more than a positive attitude”

Lily Hope Lucario.

Being a survivor of abuse can mean that we are very hard on ourselves. Perhaps the most helpful and important part of recovery is to begin to take small steps to think of ourselves, and behave towards ourselves with compassion. Instead of thinking of ourselves as our problems and difficulties, we can begin to think of ourselves as a valuable person who has experienced very traumatic events and needs compassion to heal.

On the next page is a self-compassion break, which is another mindfulness technique. It takes 5-10 minutes.

Again you can use this script or you can Google self-compassion break to find spoken versions you can listen to on the internet.

Self-Compassion Break

Find a safe and comfortable place to sit. Take three deep breaths to relax.

When you notice that you're feeling stress or emotional discomfort, see if you can find the discomfort in your body.

Where do you feel it the most? Make contact with the sensations as they arise in your body.

Now, say to yourself, slowly:

1. This is a moment of suffering. It is not all of who I am. Other options include:

- This hurts.
- This is tough.
- Ouch!

2. It is understandable that I feel this way. Other options include:

- Other people feel this way when they have experienced a trauma.
- I'm not alone.
- We all struggle in our lives. Now, put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, feeling the warmth and gentle touch of your hands.

Say to yourself:

3. May I be kind to myself

See if you can find words for what you need in times like this. Other options may be:

- May I accept myself as I am
- May I give myself the compassion that I need
- May I learn to accept myself as I am ☐ May I be safe (pause) If you're having trouble finding the right language, sometimes it helps to imagine what you might say to a dear friend struggling with that same difficulty.

(pause)

- Can you say something similar to yourself, letting the words roll gently through your mind?

Love After Love

The time will come when, with elation you will greet yourself arriving at your own door,
in your own mirror and each will smile at the other's welcome,
and say, sit here.
Eat. You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart to itself, to the stranger who has loved
you all your life,
whom you ignored for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf, the photographs, the desperate
notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

Derek Walcott

Homework

- See if you can identify what your most common patterns of unhelpful thinking are.
- Try noticing one self-critical thought each day and replace it with something compassionate towards yourself.
- Do the self-compassion break twice this week.



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Notts SV Services <https://nottssvss.org.uk>

The National Association for People Abused in Childhood www.napac.org.uk

www.get.gg (www.getselfhelp.co.uk)