

THE THREE COLUMN TECHNIQUE

This is a fantastic exercise which has the capability of unpicking obsessive rumination, rather like dismantling a bomb.

HERE IS A LIST OF THINKING ERRORS, WHICH MAKE UP OBSESSIVE, NEGATIVE THINKING.

1. ALL OR NOTHING

When you see things as either black or white. If something is not perfect then it must be disastrous. One mistake means complete failure.

(This is completely unrealistic, life is not clear cut. There are many shades of grey).

2. OVER-GENERALISATION

Where after one unfortunate event you assume this will happen again, every time. For example, 'last time I went into town, I had a panic attack. I'll never get better. This will always happen to me.'

(This will certainly make you feel bad, but there is no justification in fact for seeing one instance as proving a rule).

3. MENTAL FILTER

Where you pick out a negative or worrying detail and dwell on it exclusively, thus seeing the whole situation as bad.

(This will certainly make you feel upset, but you will without doubt be missing out on the positive aspects).

4. DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

People who are anxious have a strong tendency to say that positive experiences don't count, for some reason. You may say a successful event was a 'fluke'.

(This makes things seem worse than they are and means you don't let yourself take pleasure from positive events, or take any credit).

5. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

This involves assuming the worst when there is no real reason: for instance, expecting failure before having even tried.

(Clearly this will only worsen your anxious feelings).

6. CATASTROPHISING

When you exaggerate the importance of your own imperfections or errors or fears. For example, 'I made a mistake, how awful, I can never show my face here again.'

(Remember, you do not think about other people's mistakes in the same way).

7. EMOTIONAL REASONING

Where you believe that, because you feel so afraid, there must really be some danger, or because things feel so dreadful to you, you believe they really are in a mess.

(However, it is most often the case that anxious feelings are not realistic, and cannot be relied upon for their accuracy).

8. 'SHOULD' STATEMENTS

For instance, thinking you 'should' be able to stay calm all the time, or you 'must' never get angry.

(Such rigid statements are over demanding and unreasonable, they cause unnecessary pressure, and often, unnecessary guilt).

9. LABELLING AND MISLABELLING

Here, you label yourself as a 'useless' person, on the basis of a mistake you made. When your total idea of yourself is determined by something you have done.

(It makes as much sense as defining yourself as a joiner, because you have put up a shelf)!

10. PERSONALISATION

To assume that when something goes badly, it was entirely your fault. (Personalisation usually causes guilt; it leads you to assume responsibility for happenings that are almost certainly due to many factors, only one of which might be yourself).

Now, divide a page into three columns, and label each one as follows:

A. Automatic anxious thought

B. Thinking error

C. Reasonable thought

In the first column, write down your thinking and your fears, EXACTLY as they are. Don't try to argue or rationalise, just write them down. Don't try to neutralise the bad thoughts with good thoughts. Just write them, without additions.

Go through each point you have written and pick out each thinking error that occurs. Give each thinking error its number, 1 – 10.

In the second column write down the name of each thinking error, for example 'Should Statement'.

Now, read the following information, and turn each of the thinking errors into a realistic statement, for the third column. Rewrite the thoughts, as they truly are.

What is really the worst thing that can happen? If this did in fact happen, would it be disastrous? How likely is it that the worst thing will happen?

Have I been in a similar situation before? Did I get through it last time?

Am I really feeling any worse than anybody else would under similar circumstances?

Do others see the situation in the same anxious way? If not, am I getting it out of perspective?

Am I completely responsible for 100% of everything that happens and for everything that goes wrong?

Am I jumping to conclusions? Is there another way of viewing the situation?

Do other people have difficult times as well; do other people feel anxious or depressed at times? YES.

Every time I say 'should' to myself, for example, 'I should be good natured all the time,' I will ask myself 'Why should I?' Often 'Should Statements' are over demanding and unrealistic.

This exercise relates to the negative feelings you experience, the irrational responsibility you feel, and the unrealistic way you regard yourself. It does not relate to any trauma which has happened to you. It is there to help you deal with the mind lock you now find yourself in.

Experiences such as those recorded here by Em, Sara and others, need to be tenderly healed. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can deal with the automatic negative fallout, that has become the habitual response.

A PERSONAL EXAMPLE OF THE THREE COLUMN TECHNIQUE IN ACTION!

COLUMN ONE

AUTOMATIC ANXIOUS THOUGHT

I smashed a plant pot in the bathroom and didn't immediately clean it up. I sent my daughter for a bath knowing there was broken pottery on the floor, and she cut her foot. A piece of pottery will now enter her blood stream and kill her.

COLUMN TWO

THINKING ERRORS

ALL OR NOTHING

Either she is OK, or she is dead and my mistake must mean the worst.

MENTAL FILTER

As far as I am concerned, a piece of pottery HAS entered her system and it WILL kill her. As far as I'm concerned, I deliberately sent my daughter for a bath knowing the pottery was there.

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

I EXPECT the worst to have happened.

CATASTROPHISING

I am a bad mother. I am careless. I don't care. It is all my fault.

I am to blame. I knew the risks.

EMOTIONAL REASONING

Because I feel so bad, it IS bad.

I SHOULD, I MUST

I should never make mistakes. I must never make mistakes or be forgetful.

LABELLING AND MISLABELLING

I am a bad careless person. I am a bad mother.

PERSONALISATION

I made my daughter cut her foot. I allowed her to walk on pottery.

I knew it would happen.

COLUMN THREE

REASONABLE THOUGHTS

What a nasty accident! Clean the cut, it is not a bad one. It will heal in a couple of days. Bits don't really get into the blood stream and children are always having accidents like this.

I forgot to move the pottery. Damn! I have had so much on my mind today, trying to get everything done. I meant to clean it up as soon as I had put dinner in the oven, but it completely left my mind. If I had remembered, I would have moved it. I'm sorry.

Let's get it moved now. I feel awful, but accidents happen. Nobody's perfect, there is no real harm done. I have checked the cut, and I can see no pottery. I have put on a plaster and done my best. There is no pottery to see. I can trust my eyes. Why should some pottery have entered the bloodstream? This is not the way the body works. I forgot to sweep the pottery up, but so did my husband. It could have happened to anybody. I am not a bad mother. I am upset because my daughter has hurt herself. I would never knowingly put my daughter at risk. I simply forgot because I was so busy. My daughter is not a little child anymore, and she was jumping around in the bathroom, able to see quite clearly that there was broken pottery under her feet. She was actually being quite mischievous. I feel bad because I always take on the guilt and feel like I made the bad thing happen. This is not the case. My feelings don't match the truth. I feel bad because I am a GOOD mother. If I was a bad mother I would not care about my daughter's foot. We ALL make mistakes. Accidents happen.

***WHOSE VOICE IS LYING TO YOU? FIND YOUR OWN VOICE,
AND
SHOUT LOUDER!***