

DUCKLOW'S

TRIPLE COLUMN FOR EMOTIONS

ALEXANDER AND THE TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO
GOOD, VERY BAD DAY (BY JUDITH VIORST)

Perhaps you know this depressing and humorous childhood rant! Here is the first paragraph:

"I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day."

Now that is depressing!

HERE IS WHAT A THERAPIST WOULD DO FOR ALEXANDER

Writing down your thoughts and feelings can be a good response for depression and anxiety. Find a journal, a simple notebook. Write in it when you are angry, distressed about events going on in your life, or feeling blue. Carry the journal with you.

"Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy" by Dr. David Burns, a book based on a field called Cognitive Therapy, describes many techniques for helping ease depression. Many of these techniques involve writing. One technique is the "triple-column" technique. Write down in one column your thoughts -- i think of them as "automatic thoughts." Write, in another column, the distortions or errors in your thoughts (there is a list of common distortions below). Then, in the third column, you dispute the distortions -- fight back!

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This is beneficial because how you think, and the errors (such as exaggerations and over-generalizations) in your thoughts, directly affect your mood.

One client reported, "I've found the triple-column technique particularly helpful at my job. I use it when a project goes wrong, and I begin to think I was the cause (or that I may be blamed anyway!)." For people sensitive to criticism, the business world can be a difficult place with everyone competing for limited resources--salary, promotions, the most appealing projects.

Just as an example, suppose you think: "I didn't do well on this project. They may fire me for not doing well." Write that down, then list the distortions. For instance, that statement contained distortions of "all-or-nothing thinking" and "fortune telling."

Now switch to reality disputation-mode to write down: "Why would they fire me for this mistake? I've made mistakes before and I'm still employed. And even if by some odd chance they did fire me, I could handle it. I've handled tough things before!"

Write down anything that seems reasonable to you. Writing things down can get them out of your mind and onto the paper.

Automatic Thoughts This is depression or anxiety thinking	Distortions or Errors This is the diagnosis of your thinking problems	Dispute Distortions This is a right mind response
I didn't do well on this project. They may fire me for not doing well.	all-or-nothing thinking fortune telling	Why would they fire me for this mistake? I've made mistakes before and I'm still employed. And even if by some odd chance they did fire me, I could handle it. I've handled tough things before!

The automatic thoughts are kind of an emotional reasoning and they can come fast and furious. They are emotion based. Some are so familiar that you will not be aware that the thoughts have passed through your mind, inciting fear and depression.

Checking the distortions list takes a couple of minutes but it is really worth it. Soon you will hear the automatic thoughts and be able to categorize them in a way that takes out the hurt.

Disputing your distortions takes more time and energy than the other 2 columns. This is the “work” of the exercise. It also takes more space to write your response.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU THINK -- WHAT ARE COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS?

In many cases, depression actually is the result of habitual negative thoughts. When bad things happen, we begin chastising ourselves with thoughts such as: “I’m no good, I’m a total failure or Nothing ever goes my way.” Our feelings follow what we are thinking and negative thoughts like these can send us spiraling down into worry and depression.

This concept is the guiding principle behind cognitive therapy. If we think something often enough, we begin to believe it’s true and our feelings match what we are thinking about ourselves. To conquer depression, we must confront those automatic negative thoughts and replace them with more truthful ones.

Cognitive therapy is directed at 10 common cognitive distortions, or faulty thought patterns, that send us into depression. See if you recognize yourself in any of these.

1. **All-or-Nothing Thinking:** John recently applied for a promotion in his firm. The job went to another employee with more experience. John wanted this job badly and now feels that he will never be promoted. He feels that he is a total failure in his career.
2. **Overgeneralization:** Linda is lonely and often spends most of her time at home. Her friends sometimes ask her to come out for dinner and meet new people. Linda feels that that is it useless to try to meet people. No one really could like her. People are all mean and superficial anyway.
3. **Mental Filter:** Mary is having a bad day. As she drives home, a kind gentleman waves her to go ahead of him as she merges into traffic. Later in her trip, another driver cuts her off. She grumbles to herself that there are nothing but rude and insensitive people in her city.
4. **Disqualifying the Positive:** Rhonda just had her portrait made. Her friend tells her how beautiful she looks. Rhonda brushes aside the compliment by saying that the photographer must have touched up the picture. She never looks that good in real life, she thinks.
5. **Jumping to Conclusions:** Chuck is waiting for his date at a restaurant. She’s now 20 minutes late. Chuck laments to himself that he must have done something wrong and now she has stood him up. Meanwhile, across town, his date is stuck in traffic.
6. **Magnification and Minimization:** Scott is playing football. He bungles a play that he’s been practicing for weeks. He later scores the winning touchdown. His teammates compliment him. He tells them he should have played better; the touchdown was just dumb luck.

7. **Emotional Reasoning:** Laura looks around her untidy house and feels overwhelmed by the prospect of cleaning. She feels that it's hopeless to even try to clean.
8. **Should Statements:** David is sitting in his doctor's waiting room. His doctor is running late. David sits stewing, thinking, "With how much I'm paying him, he should be on time. He ought to have more consideration." He ends up feeling bitter and resentful.
9. **Labeling and Mislabeled:** Donna just cheated on her diet. I'm a fat, lazy pig, she thinks.
10. **Personalization:** Jean's son is doing poorly in school. She feels that she must be a bad mother. She feels that it's all her fault that he isn't studying.

If you recognize any of these behaviors in yourself, then you're halfway there.

HERE'S AN EXPERIMENT FOR YOU

Over the next few weeks, monitor the self-defeating ways in which you respond to situations. Practice recognizing your automatic thoughts and the cognitive distortions. Spend a few extra minutes in disputing the distortions.

Make sure that you do this in writing. You can write on a 3x5 card or a keytab. Just keep your experiences together.

Bring your completed experiment to our next session.