

Automatic thoughts

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Dichotomising

Dichotomising implies that existence is regarded in terms of extremes – either or – black or white – without nuances. Individuals who are ruled by this type of thinking are very categorical in their judgements. In their view, an achievement is either a complete success or a total failure. The categorical judgements are also applied to humankind, which is subdivided into “winners “ vs. “losers”, “thoroughly good people” vs. “ thoroughly bad people” etc

Musturbation

This type of thinking implies that one’s existence is governed by imperative rules concerning what should be done and how. Musturbation is characterised by sentences containing the words “must” and “should”, such as:” It would be nice to go on a pick-nick, but I really must clean the oven” or “ I should not be watching television before I’ve done the dishes”.

Selective abstraction

This kind of automatic thoughts directs one’s attention to the gloomy aspects of life, while the positive ones remain unseen. Selective abstraction is like wearing a pair of dark glasses. Everything one sees appears dark and depressing. By focussing selectively on the negative aspects of life, one tends to remember unpleasant incidents and to dismiss the pleasant ones. One sad part of a context is noticed at the expense of the whole.

Disqualifying

This type of thinking implies that one turns something positive into something negative or unimportant. Successful achievements are explained in terms of “luck” or “chance”, rather than caused by one’s own ability. The salesman who got a bonus for his selling rates disqualified the reward by saying:” It was sheer luck. I’ve never done so well before and I’ll never do it again. Besides, there are so many salesmen who do much, much better than I have done, so there is really nothing to be happy about.” Disqualifying can also be used as a weapon to deaden other peoples enthusiasm and self-esteem: ”Well, the report you wrote was not too bad. It reminds me a bit of how I used to write them 20 years ago.” Instead of ”Excellent job! Well done!”

Magnifying

By magnifying, one notices something unpleasant and blows it up in an exaggerated way. Forgetting a colleague’s name or making some other minor social blunder becomes an “unforgivable mistake”. Magnifying is frequently applied to ones own mistakes, as well as to those made by others.

Personalization

Personalization means that one takes exaggerated responsibility for other people’s feelings and behaviours. If somebody seems to be in a bad mood, the personalizer immediately believes that he/she has done something

wrong to cause the other persons grumpiness. If people laugh in the street, the personalizer believes that they are laughing at him/her.

Telepathy

According to current knowledge, people are equipped with five senses. Some, however, behave as if they had a sixth – telepathy. We commit telepathy when we believe we know what people think or why they behave in a certain way. The imaginary ability to read other people’s minds can make us quite sure that others are selfish liars who dislike us and intend to use us for their purposes. A usual consequence of incorrect telepathy is isolation. We withdraw from others believing that they do not like us. Alternatively, we can choose to “clear the air” by starting an argument. This can lead to a number of embarrassing situations.

Prophecies

If telepathy is the imaginary sixth sense, the ability to make prophecies is the seventh. By prophecies we mean the tendency to presuppose that a certain future event will turn out in a negative way. For instance, a patient on sickleave may turn down an invitation to a party by thinking: “It’s no use going to that party. There will be too many people asking me all sorts of embarrassing questions about how I feel and what I do.” But what do we know about the future?

Catastrophising

Catastrophising is a more extreme version of magnifying and prophecies and implies that ordinary situations are transformed into questions about life and death. A headache is appraised in terms of a brain tumour. When the children are ten minutes late the catastrophising parent “knows” that they have been kidnapped etc.

Overgeneralization

This set of automatic thoughts refers to the tendency to regard isolated incidents as typical for one’s life as a whole. A single unpleasant event leads to the expectation that the same kind of unpleasantness will repeat itself over and over again. If you fail in a certain situation you may label yourself as “stupid” or “worthless” and avoid similar situations in the future. If somebody has disappointed you in a particular instance, you may refuse to have anything to do with that person at all. Overgeneralization is often used in such a way that particular individuals are perceived as typical representatives of whole groups. Racism and prejudice against particular groups are based on overgeneralization.

Emotional thinking

This thinking implies the tendency to mix up feelings and facts, i.e. emotions are erroneously believed to be the truth about ourselves. If a person feel sad, she may believe that she is an altogether tragic character. Alternatively, she may think : ”Since I feel sad, somebody or something must have hurt me”. One reason for committing this cognitive error is that strong emotions are very convincing and make us disregard the evidence against them.

Exercise "Automatic thoughts"

In each of the situations below you will find stress generating automatic thoughts. Your mission is to: 1) identify the various types of automatic thoughts, and to 2) formulate an alternative, non-stressful explanation to each situation.

1. Greta enters a boutique in order to do some shopping. The shop assistant ignores Greta completely. Greta thinks: "I must have been rude to her somehow."

Automatic thoughts _____

Alternative explanation _____

2. When Svend wakes up in the morning, he has a temperature of 38°. He thinks: "Sickleave is for the spineless. I must go to work." He takes two aspirins and goes.

Automatic thoughts _____

Alternative explanation _____

3. Lena has been given a promotion. Her boss is very eager to explain what is expected from her in her new position. Lena thinks: "He believes that I'm an idiot and that I don't understand what I'm supposed to do"

Automatic thoughts _____

Alternative explanation _____

4. Late in the evening, Samir realizes that he has forgotten to correct some errors in the report that he has given to his boss. He thinks: "So typical! I simply cannot do anything right!"

Automatic thoughts _____

Alternative explanation _____

5. Anette feels increasingly stressed at work. Her workload gets worse every day and soon there will be yet another re-organization. She thinks: "I cannot quit. It's absolutely impossible to find a new job. I would get ruined!"

Automatic thoughts _____

Alternative explanation _____

6. Bertil wants to surprise his wife with a romantic candle-light dinner. He has prepared everything and waits for her to come home. But his wife is late. When she is 30 minutes late, Bertil "knows" that she has another man...

Automatic thoughts _____

Alternative explanation _____

7. Siri is on sickleave due to stress. She is lying on a sofa, trying to relax. The doctor has prescribed two weeks of rest but she feel uncomfortable being so inactive. There are so many things that ought to be done with her home and here she is doing nothing. She decides to give the house a thorough cleaning.

Automatic thoughts _____

Alternative explanation _____

8. Anna suffers from stress symptoms and has made an appointment at the doctor's. She is sitting in the waiting room and feels a growing irritation. The appointment was scheduled for 10 o'clock. Now it's 10.10 and she has not been called by the doctor yet. She says to herself: "It's so typical that I always have to do with idiots who's only ambition is to steel my time!"

Automatic thoughts _____

Alternative explanation _____

9. Lillemor is introducing a new employee to some older colleagues but realizes that she has forgotten his name. She thinks: "My God, how embarrassing! I have made a fool of myself! He will never forgive me! I wish I could disappear..."

Automatic thoughts _____

Alternative explanation _____

10. Robert gives a lecture in psychology. The audience is very interested and gives him a great applause. Afterwards, a number of people want to shake his hand and tell him how much they appreciated his speech. In the men's lavatory, Robert happens to overhear a conversation between two members of the audience. One of the men is somewhat critical of Roberts lecture. Robert becomes sad and thinks: "I'll never lecture again!"

Automatic thoughts _____

Alternative explanation _____