



# UNDERSTANDING THOUGHTS

## Learning to Recognize and Correct Your Dysfunctional Thinking

3D Recovery ® Resource 2.1

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“Watch your thoughts, for they become words.

Watch your words, for they become actions.

Watch your actions, for they become habits.

Watch your habits, for they become your character.

Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.”

--Unknown

“We cannot alter facts, but we can alter our ways of looking at them.”

--Phyllis Bottome

### **Thoughts can be Functional or Dysfunctional**

Some of the ways we think about ourselves, others, and our life situations help us adapt effectively to environments and meet important needs and goals. However, other thoughts are dysfunctional and may interfere with our ability to effectively manage our lives. These dysfunctional thoughts may be overly negative, overly generalized, or otherwise inaccurately reflect our realities. Aaron Beck (1967), the founder of *Cognitive Therapy*, believed that depression is the result of making automatic negative interpretations of situations, regardless of the accuracy of those interpretations. Often these negative interpretations or thoughts are driven by deep-seated, pervasive beliefs about the way the world works that are also negative, inaccurate, or otherwise dysfunctional. Similarly, Albert Ellis, originator of a form of cognitive therapy known as *Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy*, stated that ineffective behavior is “largely a result of thinking...illogically or irrationally” (1962, p. 36). Ellis noted that irrational beliefs and thoughts tend to be rigid, dogmatic, and demanding, whereas rational beliefs and thoughts tend to be flexible, contextual, and non-demanding. He further noted that our functioning can be improved when one “learns to maximize [one’s] rational and minimize [one’s] irrational thinking” (1962, p. 36). 3D Recovery summarizes these ideas with the following definitions:



### **Functional Thoughts...**

- Are based on observation and reason
- Accurately interpret the actions of others
- Are specific to the current situation
- Are not distorted by painful past experiences

### **Dysfunctional Thoughts...**

- Are not accurate
- Are not based on reason
- Are over-generalized
- Are distorted by painful past experiences

### **Common Types of Dysfunctional Thoughts**

#### **1. Overgeneralizing**

Often we may take a conclusion that applies to one situation and apply it to situations that don't fit with that conclusion; Beck and Weishaar (2011) called this overgeneralizing. For example, we may understand our own reasons for engaging in certain actions and assume that other people's reasons for engaging in the same or similar actions are identical to our own. Additionally, we may engage in globalization – assuming that if something is true in one situation it's true in all situations. In both of these situations, we may take things that are sometimes true and *overgeneralize* to say that they are always true.

#### **Examples of overgeneralized thoughts:**

- "People who do bad things are always evil," or "If I do a bad thing, I am wicked."
- "My past history will always determine my future."
- "Things I learned in childhood will always be relevant to my life."
- "The bus driver this morning was rude, so all bus drivers must be rude."
- "No one will ever want to date me."

#### **Examples of more functional, less generalized thoughts:**

- "Just because someone does something I consider wrong or bad does not necessarily mean he or she is a bad person."
- "I am older now and may need to learn new ways to adapt."
- "This person is an individual and does not represent all people in this category."
- "This person may not want to date me, but maybe the next person I ask out will."

#### **2. Negative Filter**

When we only attend to specific aspects of situations rather than the whole picture, we are seeing things through a *negative filter*, or what Beck and Weishaar (2011) called selective abstraction. For example, we may only notice and attend to negative aspects of situations, or we may note only our failures but not our successes.

Examples of negatively filtered thoughts:

- “My self-worth is solely driven by my successes and failures.”
- “Only my failures matter.”
- “The whole day was ruined because it was hot.”

Examples of more functional, less negative thoughts:

- “I am more than my successes and failures.”
- “It may be hot but there are other things I can do that are fun.”

**3. Pain is Unbearable**

Sometimes we have thoughts that we are incapable of dealing with unpleasant things. Clearly this is not true; although we may wish we did not have to endure unpleasantness, we are capable of tolerating it. Ellis identified this kind of overly dramatic thinking as irrational (1962; 2011). These thoughts can cause us to make excessive attempts to avoid events we are not certain will be positive or rewarding. This can mean that we avoid taking interpersonal risks or being emotionally vulnerable, which can distance us from others.

Examples of thoughts driven by a belief that *pain is unbearable*:

- “I cannot tolerate bad things happening to me.”
- “It is awful and unbearable when things do not go my way.”
- “I must avoid suffering at all costs.”
- “I should never be tired or sick.”

Examples of more functional thoughts about pain and misfortune:

- “Bad things aren’t fun, but they are survivable.”
- “I can get through this.”
- “I would like to get my way, but it’s not the end of the world if I don’t.”
- “Sometimes bad things happen.”

**4. Excessive Responsibility**

In life, some of the things that happen to us are the result of our own behaviors, and some things are beyond our control. It is vital that we are able to distinguish between the two. When we understand what we can control, we can focus our energies on those behaviors and choices that we are capable of changing rather than those we are not. When we fail to distinguish between things that are in our control and things that are external, we may be assigning what Beck and Weishaar (2011) called *excessive responsibility* for the events in our lives to either ourselves or others.

Examples of thoughts that reflect excessive responsibility:

- “Everything is my fault.”
- “My life is completely uncontrollable.”
- “I am helpless and unable to change anything.”
- “Everything I do is because I had a bad childhood.”
- “I am the only one who can fix this.”

Examples of more functional thoughts about responsibility:

- “Not everything is my fault.”
- “I can’t control everything about my life, but I can control some things.”
- “I am not helpless.”
- “My past does not have to determine my future.”
- “It is okay to ask for help.”

## 5. **Self-References**

Sometimes we interpret situations as being directly related to us when we are not the focal point at all. At other times, we may have thoughts that insist upon our own needs above those of others. Beck and Weishaar (2011) called this kind of dysfunctional thought *self-referencing* or personalization. When we think these thoughts, we are making things about ourselves that aren’t necessarily about us. \_

Examples of thoughts reflecting excessive *self-reference*:

- “I must be the center of attention.”
- “The world must always treat me fairly.”
- “Everyone must like me at all times.”
- “He’s laughing, so he must be laughing at me.”
- “If you really loved me, you’d buy me a car.”
- “If I don’t like this movie, you shouldn’t either.”

Examples of more functional thoughts with less personalization:

- “Everyone deserves attention, not just me.”
- “Sometimes life is not fair.”
- “Not everyone is going to like me, and that’s okay.”
- “Everyone is allowed to have their own opinion. It’s okay that we don’t always agree.”

## 6. **All or Nothing Thinking**

Very few things are “black or white,” or “all or nothing.” Rather, most situations have nuances or “shades of gray.” When we are unable to see alternatives other than the extremes, we are demonstrating what both Beck (1967) and Ellis (1962; 2011) called *dichotomous thinking*.

Examples of thoughts reflecting dichotomous thinking:

- “If I am not perfect, I am a failure.”
- “If one thing goes wrong, everything goes wrong.”
- “If you don’t agree with me on all things, you are my enemy.”
- “Nothing ever goes my way.”
- “Everyone hates me.”
- “You’re either for me or against me.”

Examples of more functional, less dichotomous thoughts:

- “It is unrealistic for me to expect to be perfect.”
- “I can’t be good at everything.”
- “We can agree to disagree.”

## 7. **Making Wants Into Needs**

Sometimes we think that we need things that aren’t necessities at all. Rather, these are things we want or desire. When we have these kinds of thoughts we are *making wants into needs*, or what Ellis (2011) called equating needs with preferences.

Examples of thoughts that make our desires appear to be needs:

- “I must have this cell phone.”
- “My mother has to let me go to the prom, or I will die.”
- “I need to be rich to be happy.”

Examples of more functional thoughts that recognize our desires:

- “I would like a new cell phone, but it’s not essential.”
- “Money is not the solution to everything.”

## 8. **Mind Reading**

The only thoughts we can truly know are our own. However, at times we make assumptions about what others are thinking; these assumptions are often incorrect. Drawing conclusions based on assumption while lacking evidence is what Beck and Weishaar (2011) called making arbitrary inferences. When we make these kinds of assumptions or inferences, we are engaging in *mind reading*.

Examples of thoughts reflecting mind reading:

- “People should know what I want.”
- “I should know what other people want.”
- “I can assume that John is doing that for this reason, even though I have not talked to John about his reasons.”

Examples of more functional thoughts that avoid mind reading:

- “I can’t expect people to know what I want without me explaining it.”
- “If I want to know why John did that, I should ask him.”

## 9. **Human Happiness is Externally Caused**

No one can “cause” our happiness. Happiness and unhappiness are emotions driven by our interpretation of events, rather than by the events themselves. When we attribute our happiness to events, we are assuming that *human happiness* is *externally caused* and that we cannot control our own feelings. As Ellis (1962; 2011) noted, this is an irrational belief, because we are capable of determining our own reactions to events in our lives.

Examples of thoughts reflecting this external belief:

- “My mother is making me angry.”
- “My job is making me miserable.”
- “I can only be happy if I make more money.”
- “I couldn’t help hitting her because she pushed me to it.”

Examples of more functional thoughts taking personal responsibility for feelings:

- “No one can make me angry. I choose how I respond.”
- “I do not like my job but I am the one choosing to focus on the negative aspects of it.”
- “Money will not make me happy.”
- “I am responsible for my actions.”

## 10. **Harmful Things Can Lead to Happiness**

Sometimes we justify things we know to be unhealthy or dangerous with the rationalization that these things make us feel good temporarily. When we do this, we are convincing ourselves that *harmful things can lead to happiness*, which Ellis (1962; 2011) identified as an irrational belief. Additionally, we may convince ourselves that continuing to do something we know is harmful is preferable to giving it up for fear of the unpleasant feelings of losing something that has helped us cope in the past.

Some harmful things we may convince ourselves are beneficial for us include:

- Smoking
- Alcohol or other drugs
- Indulging in excessive amounts of sweet, salty, or fatty foods
- Sexually reckless behavior
- Gambling
- Excessive use of video games
- Spending money we don’t have

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## Summary of Understanding Thoughts

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### *Functional Versus Dysfunctional Thoughts*

<b>Dysfunctional Thoughts</b>	<b>Functional Thoughts...</b>
Are overgeneralized	Are context specific
Attend to only part of the situation	Are attentive to the whole situation
Prevent us from taking healthy risks	Acknowledge that we can deal with pain
Give us too much or too little responsibility	Give credit where credit is due
Make it all about us	Share responsibility with others
Are black and white	Recognize shades of gray
Turn wants into needs	Keep wants as desires
Prevents us from acting	Allow for action
Attribute our happiness to others	Take back control
Rationalize harmful behaviors	Acknowledge when behaviors are harmful

### *Replacing Dysfunctional Thoughts with Functional Ones*

<b>Dysfunctional Thoughts</b>	<b>Functional Thoughts</b>
"People, things, and events should not disappoint me."	"I will sometimes be disappointed, but I can tolerate disappointment."
"I can never make mistakes."	"We all make mistakes."
"This isn't fair."	"Life is not always fair."
"Everyone must like me all the time."	"Not everyone will like me, and that's okay."
"You are making me mad. It is your fault I am angry."	"No one can make me angry unless I allow them to do so."
"I will never amount to anything because I had a bad childhood."	"I may have had a bad childhood, but now I can make my own decisions."
"Nothing ever goes my way."	"Sometimes things don't work in my favor, but sometimes they do."
"I can't quit smoking."	"It's not that I can't quit smoking, it's that I don't want to right now."
"I am a failure."	"I didn't succeed this time, but I may next time if I try."
"I can't deal with pain."	"Pain is unavoidable at times. It will not be pleasant but I can deal with it if I need to."