

STOPPING STUPID THOUGHTS

“Of course, I messed this up. I always find a way to ruin things.”

“He only complimented me to be polite. No one actually thinks that about me.”

“She still hasn’t replied to my message; she must be mad at me.”

Thoughts like these are painful and can happen so quickly that you may never stop to question them. That’s why we call them stupid thoughts. Known in psychology as “cognitive distortions,” these inaccurate or exaggerated thoughts can damage self-esteem, mood, and relationships with others. They can be extreme and frequent, often contributing to anxiety and depression. It’s hard to feel good when someone is saying mean things to you all the time, especially when that person is you!

Fortunately, with practice, you can address and change these thoughts. By noticing the negative things you say to yourself, you can choose nicer thoughts to replace them. Try this five step exercise using post-it notes or use the shapes below to create your own cut-outs.

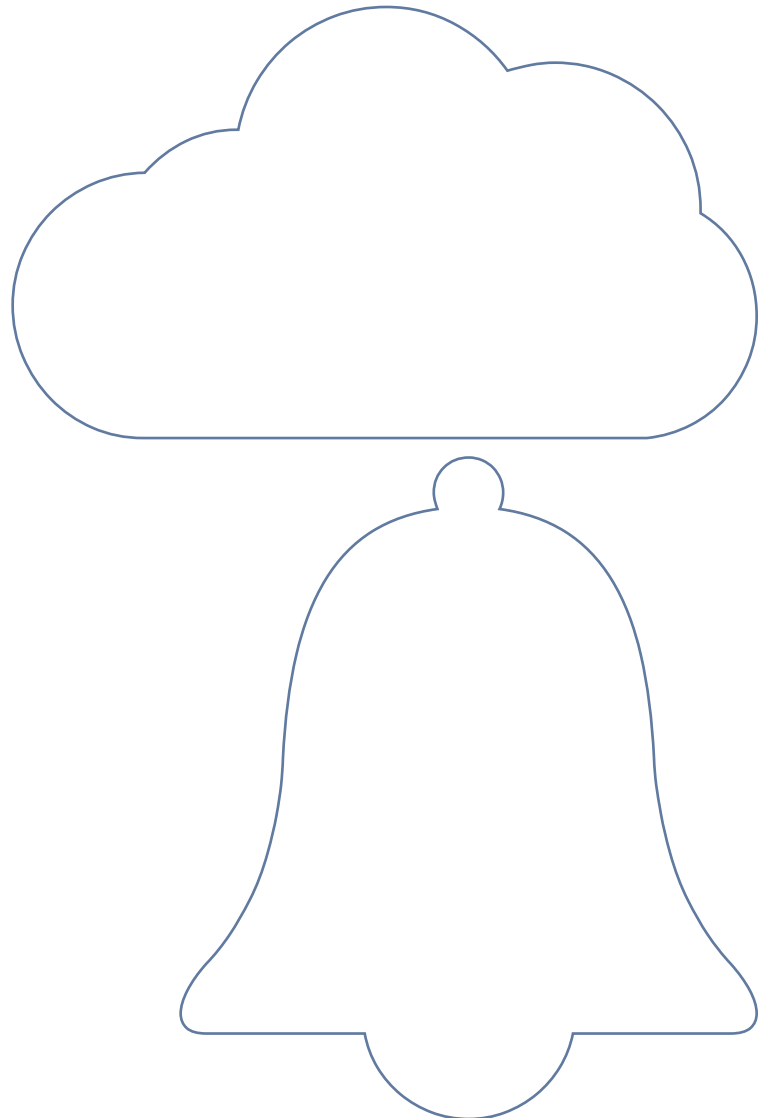
Writing out your thoughts will help you to process and reinforce the thought change in a different way. Putting the words up where you need to see them helps provide visual reinforcement where and when you need it – especially when it’s hard for your brain to do it. Overtime, hopefully the thoughts will become more automatic.

Materials:

Post-it notes
OR
Construction paper, scissors, markers and tape.

Instructions:

1. Identify the stupid thought. Use the list on the back of this page to identify your most common stupid thoughts (cognitive distortions).
2. Use a post-it note, or cut out the shapes below on colorful construction paper. Write the thought on one side of the cut-out (or the sticky side of the post-it note).
3. Identify a corresponding compassionate thought. Maybe think of what you would say to a friend who was having the stupid thought.
4. Write the compassionate thought on the other side of the cut-out (or the non-sticky side of the post-it note).
5. Tape or stick the compassionate (reframed) thoughts where you need to see them most – by your bed, in the bathroom, on your desk, or in your car!



Stupid Thoughts*

1. All-or-nothing thinking: You see things black or white, good or bad, all or none. There is no gray area—just the extremes. It has to be perfect or else you're a failure. Example: *"I'm always a horrible mother." "I'm never going to get it together."*

2. Overgeneralization: Taking a single event and making sweeping conclusions. Example: *"My best friend is mad at me. I'm sure she doesn't want to be friends ever again."*

3. Negative mental filter: You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it, ignoring all the positive or neutral things that might have happened. Example: *"It was such an important meeting. Why did I make that stupid statement? I'm such an idiot."*

4. Discounting the positive: You ignore when good things happen by insisting they "don't count" because there were other circumstances. This allows your brain to stay in a pattern of negative thinking. Example: *"No one will ever love me." "We love you." "No, you don't understand. No one will ever love me."*

5. Jumping to conclusions: You assume that something bad will happen or that someone will have negative feelings toward you, even though you don't have any evidence to support that thought. Example: *"My boss must be mad at me for being late. I'm not going to bother talking to him because he won't believe my excuse."*

Two subtypes of jumping to conclusions:

a. Mind reading: You assign negative thoughts and feelings to other people, even when there are other logical explanations for what happened. Example: *"My neighbor rushed by me and didn't even acknowledge me. I must have done something wrong."*

b. Fortune Telling: You assume that things are going to turn out badly and treat negative outcomes as eventualities, not possibilities. Example: *"I submitted my application, but I already know they won't call me back for an interview."*

6. Catastrophizing or Minimizing: Catastrophizing is when you exaggerate the importance of things that you do (like making a mistake at work) or that someone else does (that someone got a better office than you.), Minimizing is the opposite; it's when you discount the importance of something that's actually really important. Catastrophizing Example: *"Why did I use that word in that email? I'm sure I'm going to get fired."* Minimizing Example: *"Yeah I got a raise, but it's not big deal. I'm not even sure why they gave it to me."*

7. Emotional reasoning: You assume that just because you felt something, it's true; it's like relying too strongly on your gut instinct. Example: *"I feel like crap, so I'm probably a crappy person."*

8. Should statements: You focus on how things should have gone or should have been rather than how they actually are. When you direct should statements toward others, you can feel anger, frustration, and resentment. Examples: *"I should really exercise more. I'm so gross." or "My brother should have talked to me before he made any decisions about where our family is going. He's so inconsiderate."*

9. Labeling: This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. You take a situation (a one-time event, misunderstanding or accident) and you determine it must be about your character or their character. Examples: *"They didn't like me: I'm a huge nobody." or "That guy cut me off. He's obviously a jerk."*

10. Personalization: You take on responsibility for negative events, ignoring how other people or factors may have contributed. Example: *"Our relationship ended because I was a bad partner."*

11. Blaming: The opposite of personalization. You lay blame entirely on other people, without thinking about where you may have gone wrong or how you could have changed a situation. Example: *"Our project is slowed down because they never made a point to contact me. This is all their fault."*