

FORM B.2. Categories of Distorted Automatic Thoughts: A Guide for Patients

1. **Mind reading:** You assume that you know what people think without having sufficient evidence of their thoughts. "He thinks I'm a loser."
2. **Fortunetelling:** You predict the future negatively: Things will get worse, or there is danger ahead. "I'll fail that exam," or "I won't get the job."
3. **Catastrophizing:** You believe that what has happened or will happen will be so awful and unbearable that you won't be able to stand it. "It would be terrible if I failed."
4. **Labeling:** You assign global negative traits to yourself and others. "I'm undesirable," or "He's a rotten person."
5. **Discounting positives:** You claim that the positive things you or others do are trivial. "That's what wives are supposed to do—so it doesn't count when she's nice to me," or "Those successes were easy, so they don't matter."
6. **Negative filtering:** You focus almost exclusively on the negatives and seldom notice the positives. "Look at all of the people who don't like me."
7. **Overgeneralizing:** You perceive a global pattern of negatives on the basis of a single incident. "This generally happens to me. I seem to fail at a lot of things."
8. **Dichotomous thinking:** You view events or people in all-or-nothing terms. "I get rejected by everyone," or "It was a complete waste of time."
9. **Shoulds:** You interpret events in terms of how things should be, rather than simply focusing on what is. "I should do well. If I don't, then I'm a failure."
10. **Personalizing:** You attribute a disproportionate amount of the blame to yourself for negative events, and you fail to see that certain events are also caused by others. "The marriage ended because I failed."
11. **Blaming:** You focus on the other person as the *source* of your negative feelings, and you refuse to take responsibility for changing yourself. "She's to blame for the way I feel now," or "My parents caused all my problems."
12. **Unfair comparisons:** You interpret events in terms of standards that are unrealistic—for example, you focus primarily on others who do better than you and find yourself inferior in the comparison. "She's more successful than I am," or "Others did better than I did on the test."
13. **Regret orientation:** You focus on the idea that you could have done better in the past, rather on what you can do better now. "I could have had a better job if I had tried," or "I shouldn't have said that."
14. **What if?:** You keep asking a series of questions about "what if" something happens, and you fail to be satisfied with any of the answers. "Yeah, but what if I get anxious?" or "What if I can't catch my breath?"
15. **Emotional reasoning:** You let your feelings guide your interpretation of reality. "I feel depressed; therefore, my marriage is not working out."
16. **Inability to disconfirm:** You reject any evidence or arguments that might contradict your negative thoughts. For example, when you have the thought "I'm unlovable," you reject as *irrelevant* any evidence that people like you. Consequently, your thought cannot be refuted. "That's not the real issue. There are deeper problems. There are other factors."
17. **Judgment focus:** You view yourself, others, and events in terms of evaluations as good–bad or superior–inferior, rather than simply describing, accepting, or understanding. You are continually measuring yourself and others according to arbitrary standards, and finding that you and others fall short. You are focused on the judgments of others as well as your own judgments of yourself. "I didn't perform well in college," or "If I take up tennis, I won't do well," or "Look how successful she is. I'm not successful."

Chapter 2

Uncovering Automatic Thoughts

Thoughts cause feelings. This is the essential insight of cognitive therapy. All of the cognitive techniques that have been developed and refined in the last half of the twentieth century flow out of this one simple idea: that thoughts cause feelings, and many emotions you feel are preceded and caused by a thought, however abbreviated, fleeting, or unnoticed that thought may be.

In other words, events by themselves have no emotional content. It is your interpretation of an event that causes your emotions. This is often represented as the "ABC" model of emotions:

A. Event → B. Thought → C. Feeling

For example:

- A. Event: You get into your car, turn the key, and nothing happens.
- B. Thought: You interpret the event by saying to yourself, "Oh no, my battery's dead. This is awful; I'm stuck—I'll be late."
- C. Feeling: You experience an emotion appropriate to your thoughts. In this case, you feel depressed and anxious about being late.

Change the thought and you change the feeling. If you had thought, "My son must have left the lights on all night again," you might have felt anger. If you had thought, "I'll have an extra cup of coffee, relax, and wait for a jump from the tow truck," you would have felt mild annoyance at most.

In this chapter you will learn how to uncover the automatic thoughts in this cycle. This is the basic skill you need to master in order to use cognitive therapy to reduce painful feelings.

Symptom Effectiveness

By itself, uncovering automatic thoughts is not considered a full-scale treatment. It is the first step in many different cognitive behavioral treatments. However, you may feel some immediate reduction in anxiety, depression, or anger as a result of exploring how you react to upsetting situations. This is a good sign that cognitive therapy is likely to help you quickly.

On the other hand, it is more likely that you will *not* experience any improvement in symptoms by the end of this chapter. In fact, some feelings may actually intensify as a result of exploring them. Don't worry. Remember that this is an early step along the way.

Time for Mastery

Most people make significant progress during the first week of faithfully keeping a Thought Journal. The longer you practice tuning into your automatic thoughts, the better you get at it. It's a skill like knitting, skiing, writing, or singing on key—practice makes perfect.

Instructions

Negative Feedback Loop

The Event → Thought → Feeling sequence is the basic building block of emotional life. But the building blocks can become very jumbled and confusing. The emotional life of real people is not always a simple series of ABC reactions, each with its discrete starting event, thought, and resultant feeling. More often a series of ABC reactions join in a feedback loop. The ending feeling from one sequence becomes the starting event for another sequence.

In the case of painful feelings, a negative feedback loop can be set up in which an uncomfortable feeling itself becomes an "event," the subject of further thoughts, which produce more painful feelings, which become a larger event inspiring more negative thoughts, and so on. The loop continues until you work yourself into a rage, an anxiety attack, or a deep depression.

Feelings have physiological components. When you experience emotions such as fear, anger, or joy, your heart speeds up, you breathe faster and less deeply, you sweat more, and your blood vessels contract and dilate in different parts of your body. "Quiet" emotions such as depression, sadness, or grief involve a slowing down of some of your physiological systems. Both your emotion and the accompanying bodily sensations trigger an evaluation process—you start trying to interpret and label what you feel.

1. They often appear in shorthand, composed of just a few essential words phrased in telegraphic style: "lonely . . . getting sick . . . can't stand it . . . cancer . . . no good." One word or a short phrase functions as a label for a group of painful memories, fears, or self-reproaches.

An automatic thought needn't be expressed in words at all. It can be a brief visual image, an imagined sound or smell, or any physical sensation. A woman who was afraid of heights had a half-second image of the floor tilting and felt herself sliding down toward the window. This momentary fantasy triggered acute anxiety whenever she ascended above the third floor.

Sometimes the automatic thought is a brief reconstruction of some event in the past. A depressed woman kept seeing the stairway in Macy's where her husband had first announced his plan to leave her. The image of the stairway was enough to unleash all the feelings associated with that loss.

Occasionally an automatic thought can take the form of intuitive knowledge, without words, images, or sense impressions. For example, a chef who was plagued with self-doubt "just knew" that it was useless to try to get promoted to head chef.

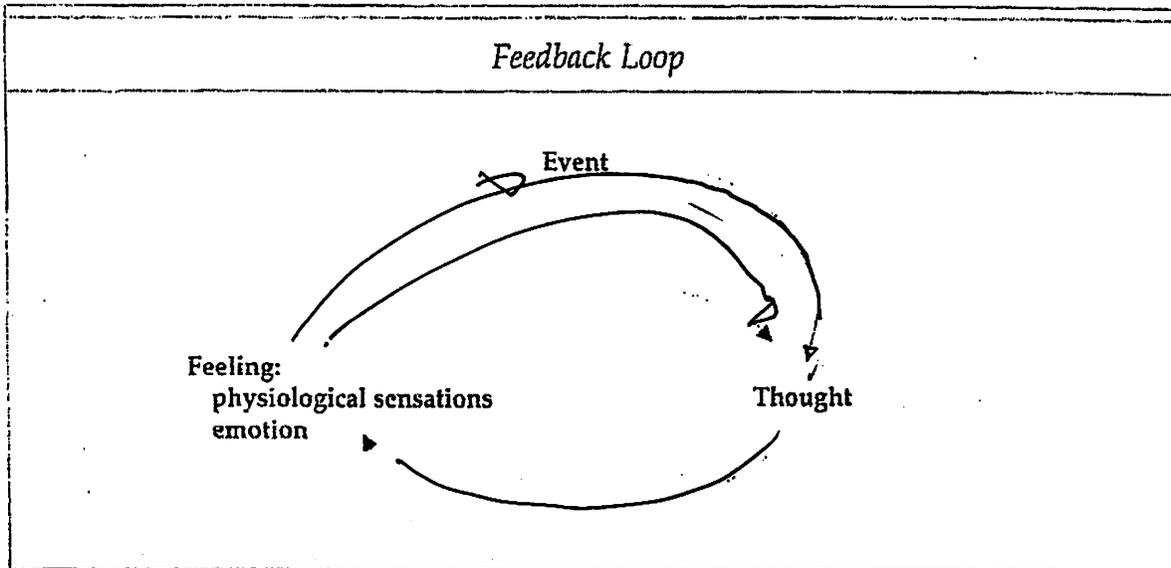
2. Automatic thoughts are almost always believed, no matter how illogical they appear upon analysis. For example, a man who reacted with rage to the death of his best friend actually believed for a time that his friend deliberately died to punish him.

Automatic thoughts have the same believable quality as direct sense impressions. You attach the same truth value to automatic thoughts as you do to sights and sounds in the real world. If you see a man getting into a Porsche and have the thought, "He's rich; he doesn't care for anyone but himself," the judgment is as real to you as the color of the car.

3. Automatic thoughts are experienced as spontaneous. You believe automatic thoughts because they are automatic. They seem to arise spontaneously out of ongoing events. They just pop into your mind and you hardly notice them, let alone subject them to logical analysis.
4. Automatic thoughts are often couched in terms of *should*, *ought*, or *must*. A woman whose husband had recently died thought, "You ought to go it alone. You shouldn't burden your friends." Each time the thought popped into her mind, she felt a wave of hopelessness. People torture themselves with "shoulds" such as "I should be happy. I should be more energetic, creative, responsible, loving, generous. . . ." Each ironclad "should" precipitates a sense of guilt or a loss of self-esteem.

"Shoulds" are hard to eradicate, since their origin and function is actually adaptive. They are simple rules to live by that have worked in the past. They are templates for survival that you can access quickly in times of stress. The problem is that they become so automatic that you don't have time to analyze them, and so rigid that you can't modify them to fit changing situations.

5. Automatic thoughts tend to "awfulize." These thoughts predict catastrophe, see danger in everything, and always expect the worst. A stomachache is a symptom of cancer, the look of distraction in a lover's face is the first sign of withdrawal. "Awfulizers" are the major source of anxiety.



For example, if your car wouldn't start late at night when you were in a bad neighborhood, the negative feedback loop might go like this:

- A. Event: Car doesn't start.
- B. Thought: "Oh no, this is awful. I'll be late—and this is a dangerous street."
- C. Feelings: Heart beating fast, feeling hot and sweaty, irritation, anxiety
- B. Thought: "I'm scared . . . I could get mugged—this is really bad!"
- C. Feelings: Stomach clenching, hard to breathe, dizzy, fear
- B. Thought: "I'm freaking out . . . I'll lose control. . . Can't move . . . can't get safe."
- C. Feelings: Strong adrenalin rush, panic

The Nature of Automatic Thoughts

You are constantly describing the world to yourself, giving each event or experience some label. You automatically make interpretations of everything you see, hear, touch, and feel. You judge events as good or bad, pleasurable or painful, safe or dangerous. This process colors all of your experiences, labeling them with private meanings.

These labels and judgments are fashioned from the unending dialog you have with yourself, a waterfall of thoughts cascading down the back of your mind. These thoughts are constant and rarely noticed, but they are powerful enough to create your most intense emotions. This internal dialog is called *self-talk* by rational-emotive therapist Albert Ellis, and *automatic thoughts* by cognitive theorist Aaron Beck. Beck prefers the term automatic thoughts "because it more accurately describes the way thoughts are experienced. The person perceives these thoughts as though they are by reflex—without any prior reflection or reasoning; and they impress him as plausible and valid." (Beck 1976)

Automatic thoughts usually have the following characteristics:

abstraction means looking at one set of cues in your environment to the exclusion of all others.

10. Automatic thoughts are learned. Since childhood people have been telling you what to think. You have been conditioned by family, friends, and the media to interpret events a certain way. Over the years you have learned and practiced habitual patterns of automatic thoughts that are difficult to detect, let alone change. That's the bad news. The good news is that what has been learned can be unlearned and changed.

Listening to Your Automatic Thoughts

Hearing your automatic thoughts is the first step in gaining control of unpleasant emotions. Most of your internal dialog is harmless. The automatic thoughts that cause harm can be identified because they almost always precede a continuing painful feeling.

To identify the automatic thoughts that are causing a continued painful feeling, try to recall the thoughts you had just prior to the start of the emotion and those that go along with the sustained emotion. You can think of it as listening in on an intercom. The intercom is always on, even while you are conversing with others and going about your life. You are functioning in the world and you are also talking to yourself at the same time. Listen in on the intercom of your internal dialog, and hear what you are telling yourself. Your automatic thoughts are assigning private, idiosyncratic meanings to many external events and internal sensations. They are making judgments and interpretations of your experience.

Automatic thoughts are often lightning fast and very difficult to catch. They flash on as a brief mental image, or are telegraphed in a single word. Here are two methods for coping with the swiftness of your thoughts:

1. Reconstruct a problem situation, going over it again and again in your imagination until the painful emotion begins to emerge. What are you thinking as the emotion comes up? Regard your thoughts as a slow-motion film. Look at your internal dialog, frame by frame. Notice the millisecond it takes to say, "I can't stand it," or the half-second image of a terrifying event. Notice how you are internally describing and interpreting the actions of others: "She's bored. . . . He's putting me down."
2. Stretch out the shorthand statement into the original statement from which it was extracted. "Feeling sick" is really "I'm feeling sick and I know I'm going to get worse. . . . I can't stand it." "Crazy" means "I feel like I'm losing control, and that must mean I'm going crazy. . . . My friends will reject me."

Hearing the shorthand isn't enough. It is necessary to listen to your entire interior argument in order to understand the distorted logic from which many painful emotions bloom.

Recording Your Thoughts

To appreciate the power of your automatic thoughts and the part they play in your emotional life, keep a Thought Journal. As soon as possible after you experience an unpleasant feeling, record it on the form that follows.