

Managing cognitive symptoms – cognitive restructuring

- **What is it?** Cognitive restructuring is the process of identifying, evaluating, and changing unhelpful thoughts that contribute to stress and other negative mood states (i.e., anxiety, depression).
- **When should I use it?** Cognitive restructuring can be helpful when stress is associated with unhelpful thought patterns, particularly worried and ruminative thoughts. Working on changing these thought patterns can make it easier to see problems and situations in a more balanced manner, thus decreasing feelings of distress.
- **Why does it work?** During periods of heightened stress, the brain is designed to focus attention on potential threats and problems, often to the exclusion of other important sources of information. As a result, several errors in thinking are common. One error, **jumping to conclusions**, involves overestimating the likelihood of a negative outcome in a given situation. Another error, **catastrophizing**, involves imagining the worst case scenario. Both of these thinking errors generally lead to increased feelings of anxiety, worry, and helplessness, which in turn can lead to avoidance instead of problem-solving. Learning how to recognize when these thinking errors occur and how to correct them can help alleviate distress and facilitate more productive coping efforts.
- **How do I do it?** Cognitive restructuring is a three-step process.

Step 1: Identifying unhelpful thoughts. Before you can change unhelpful thought patterns, you have to be aware of them. Some people find the process of identifying specific thoughts difficult, though this generally becomes easier with practice. Start by asking yourself, “*What just went through my mind,*” when you notice a shift in your emotions or physical reactions. Try to be as specific as possible as the process does not work well with vague thoughts. Also, be sure that you are looking for thoughts in response to a specific situation, as opposed to thoughts in general. Lastly, keep in mind that thoughts can include both words and images. Both are important to examine.

Step 2: Evaluating unhelpful thoughts. After you have identified thoughts that occurred prior to a change in your emotions or physical reactions, look for the two common thinking errors that are linked to stress – jumping to conclusions and catastrophizing. If either is present, continue with the next step. If not, you may be viewing the situation accurately.

Step 3: Challenging/changing unhelpful thoughts. The last step is challenging unhelpful thoughts that contribute to stress. To challenge thoughts that involve jumping to (negative) conclusions, generate a list of all the other possible outcomes for the situation (positive, neutral, and negative). Then, assess the realistic odds of your feared outcome in light of the other possible outcomes. This helps put the feared outcome in perspective. To challenge catastrophizing, write out a plan for how you could cope with the worst case if it actually happened. Engaging in problem-solving about the worst case outcome tends to decrease feelings of helplessness and can lead to new solutions that were not previously evident.

Note: If your unhelpful thought is a question (“What if I get a bad review from my boss?”), rephrase it as a statement of what you are worried about happening (“I might get a bad review from my boss”) and then follow the steps above.