

AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

Thinking is a wonderful ability. However, sometimes our thoughts can haunt us when they are negatively loaded and unhelpful. Such unpleasant thoughts can cause all kinds of stress signals (see infographic about [stress signals](#)).

How can we cope with these automatic thoughts?

First of all, it is important to know that all thoughts have a survival function. They want to protect us from potential threats. However, it is important to understand that there is a difference between an objective situation and the way we view this situation. An interpretation is not always an accurate representation of reality. In other words, thoughts can be distorted. Interpretations and automatic thoughts are sometimes so frequent that we start to convince ourselves that they are true. In that case, it becomes harder to embrace a different perspective.

Read the example below and reflect upon your way of reacting to certain situations.

Objective situation

Thoughts/Interpretations

Emotions



"People do not get upset by the events, but by the way they look at those events. What confuses people are not facts, but dogmatic opinions about the facts."

- Epictetus

EXERCISE...

How can we recognise distorted thoughts? And how can we formulate helping alternatives? This exercise only really has a helping effect when you engage in it **daily!** It is normal for these thoughts to **take a while** to diminish. Try to notice when your emotions **change** and **register** what is happening in that moment using the instructions below.

1. Situation

Try to describe the situation you are in as objectively as possible. Leave out subjective interpretations.

Objective: During my oral exam, my professor is yawning.

Subjective: During my oral exam, the professor is bored and is yawning.

2. Automatic thoughts

What automatic thoughts cross your mind? Write them down and challenge them one by one in this exercise. *The professor doesn't find my answer interesting or good. I will not pass the exam.*

3. Emotions

What emotions cross your mind? Ask yourself: what am I feeling right now? Acknowledge that these emotions have a function and let them tell you how you can take care of yourself. *Sadness, anger, disappointment, shame, ...*

4. Distortions

Try to find the cognitive distortions in your automatic thoughts.

Some examples:

- *I don't know one detail so I won't pass the exam.*
- *I took an exam in which I scored 18/20 but I can only focus on the mistakes I made that made me fail 2 marks.*
- ...

5. Alternative perspectives

Try to challenge your automatic thoughts and formulate helpful alternative thoughts.

Answering the following questions can get you started with this:

- *Is my thought correct?*
- *In what ways can I rephrase my thought so that I am milder towards myself and more considerate of my needs?*
- *How would I support a friend with a similar problem?*
- *What would a close friend tell me about this thought?*
- *Have I also experienced something different?*
- *How will I think about this situation in 5/10/15 years?*
- *What can I tell myself regarding this thought to reassure myself?*

6. Result

How do you feel after looking at alternative perspectives? Try to be aware of your emotions at this moment. You can also read out loud what you have written down.