Characteristics of Negative Automatic Thoughts

Automatic [i.e. not arising from reasoning]

Autonomous/Involuntary

Situation-specific

Habitual

Plausible

Distorted

Subjective

Idiosyncratic

Rapid/Fleeting

Condensed/Abbreviated

Repetitive

Identification of Negative Automatic Thoughts

The identification of negative automatic thoughts is a key skill for both therapist and client if CBT is to be effective.

To paraphrase the great cook Mrs Beeton, *first catch your thought.*

The problems associated with identification can be derived from an understanding of the characteristics of NATs.

Similarly, ways of aiding the process of identification flow from this understanding.

Characteristics that hinder identification…

Automatic – they arise without obvious conscious processing

Habitual – they are accepted as normal, their presence is taken for granted, they make no demands on our attention

Rapid/Fleeting – here and gone in a moment

Condensed/Abbreviated – cognitive shorthand, maybe symbolic

Characteristics that may aid identification:

Situation-specific – look for situations that give rise to shifts in emotion

Distorted – listen for words that may signal errors in thinking (e.g., moral imperatives, absolutes

Repetitive – look for patterns, emerging themes

Tips on Identification

Use of Daily Thought Records – the client is asked to keep a note of when they experience a shift in emotion, either in type or intensity. The sooner they can record this after the event, then the more likely they are to identify their thinking at the time.

Recalling in the session – ask the client to recall a recent situation when they had a strong emotional reaction.

Direct questioning – "What was going through your mind at the time?" rather than "What were you thinking?" [the former is more concrete and specific. Nevertheless, especially early in treatment, many clients cannot identify their thoughts].

Inductive questioning (guided discovery) – gently helping the client to explore a situation in detail, guiding them towards salient aspects that may reveal the automatic thoughts.

Emotional shifts in session - go for the "hot cognitions" – "What is going through your mind right now?"

Three Steps to Euthymia

Identifying – helping clients to recognise their negative automatic thoughts

Linking – helping clients to see how their negative automatic thoughts activate and perpetuate negative mood states

Modifying – helping clients to generate alternative ways of thinking [i.e. realistic appraisals of self, world and others that are not biased or distorted]

Notes on typology

- It is my impression that over the years there have emerged a number of ways of categorising the main errors in thinking that are observed in people who present with emotional difficulties.
- In some cases, it has been a matter of finding different ways to express the same kind of underlying biases in information processing.
- I have tried to keep closely to those identified by Beck and his colleagues, although at present I am unable to cite a definitive source for those listed below.
- It is important for clients and therapists alike to identify specific thinking errors because this has implications for selecting the kinds of thought-challenging strategies which will be most effective.
- I have arranged the thinking errors to form an imperfect mnemonic – DAMP DOG MESs. The final "s" is spare. Nothing is perfect – although this is an over-generalisation!

Typology of Negative Automatic Thoughts

•**Dichotomous reasoning** [*black-and-white thinking, all-or-nothing thinking*] There is a tendency to see things in terms of polarised categories, with no recognition that actually most attributes lie on a continuum - there are shades of grey. People are either good or bad, successes or failures.

•**Arbitrary inference** [*jumping to conclusions, mind-reading, fortune-telling*] Conclusions are reached on the basis of incomplete evidence. "He crossed the road to avoid me, I must have upset him".

•**Magnification/Minimisation** [*binocular trick*] The negative aspects of a situation are magnified while any positive aspects are minimised.

•**Personalisation** Here there is a tendency for the person to feel responsible for things that are out of their control. "It was my fault they did not enjoy the film".

•**Discounting the positive** [*reverse alchemy – turning gold into lead*] A compliment or favourable outcome is transmuted into something negative. "He only said that because he wants a favour".

•**Over-generalisation** [*use of absolutes – always, never, everyone*] A single incident or person serves as a basis for judging all instances in the same way. "Nobody likes me". "The traffic lights are always against me when I'm late".

•**Global judgements** [*labelling, awfulizing*] A negative or pejorative label is applied to a single situation or person (*cf* over-generalisation). "He is a complete idiot".

•**Moral imperatives** [*musts, shoulds and oughts*] Life is lived by a set of rigid rules that are applied to everyone, but typically disproportionately to the person themselves. "You should never be late".

•**Emotional reasoning** Seeing the feeling as evidence and proof of the thought. "I feel panicky, this means something bad is going to happen".

•**Selective abstraction** Judging the whole on the basis of a small negative aspect. " The evening was a disaster because I served the soup too cold".

Modification Strategies

Examining - evidence for and against

Exploring - idiosyncratic meanings

Exposing - bias and distortion

Expanding - perspective

Experimenting - behaviourally & cognitively

Golden Questions

1. What evidence is there to show that my understanding of this situation is accurate?

2. Is there another way of looking at this? There may be evidence to support an alternative explanation.

3. What would be so bad *if* my initial understanding proved to be accurate?

4. What could I do to cope *if* this really is the case?

5. What are the consequences of my believing my understanding to be accurate?

6. How can I change my understanding, after weighing up all the evidence, to make it less distressing?

Elements of the Golden Questions

EVIDENCE

IMPLICATIONS

MODIFICATION

Three Elements of Questioning - I

EVIDENCE

- Helpful to consider the source of the evidence in terms of time (past or present), person (who is/was the messenger?), and place (does it hold true in all situations?).

- Need to consider its reliability and validity.

- Is the evidence sufficiently robust/credible to bring about a change in how strongly the belief is held?

- If not, what level of evidence will the client accept?

Three Elements of Questioning - II

IMPLICATIONS

Here we are trying to understand how the belief works for the client, tapping into the idiosyncratic meanings, getting clues about dysfunctional assumptions, and drawing attention to how their behaviour and emotional reactions are intricately linked to the beliefs they hold.

Three Elements of Questioning - III

MODIFICATION

Here we are offering the possibility of change, encouraging the client to weigh up all the evidence, to recognise the biases and distortions in their thinking, and to create an alternative appraisal of the situation that triggered the negative automatic thought.