

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Thought Diary

Guidelines for completing your Thought Diary

Why should I complete the diary ?

The diary is to help you get a better understanding of how your thoughts affect the way you feel.

Completing the diary will help you to identify how your feelings change in response to what is happening around you.

Likewise, it will help you to identify the patterns of thinking that lead to you feeling bad – for example, more anxious, angry or sad.

Once you understand how your thoughts and feelings affect each other, you will be in a better position to make changes in the way you think. This will involve identifying the “thinking errors” that most often occur and then learning how to challenge them.

Thinking errors are unhelpful habits in how we think about the events that affect us – these can be things that happened in the past, or that are happening now, or that we imagine may happen in the future. See separate handout on identifying thinking errors.

When should I complete the diary ?

You should try to complete it every time you notice a sudden change in your mood. Ideally, this should be as close to the time it happens as possible. When this is not possible, try to catch and remember the exact thought (it may be a single word, a phrase, or even a mental picture) so you can write it down later.

It sounds easy, but what if I make a mistake ?

It sounds easy, but in reality it can be very difficult to do. We learn by making mistakes. It is not a test and your hand-writing or spelling are not important.

Common problems :

- It can be difficult to decide what is a *feeling* and what is a *thought*. Your therapist will be able to help you with this.
- The exact thought can be difficult to identify – remember, these are habits of thinking we take for granted, and they come and go very quickly.
- It takes practice to identify the type of *thinking error*.
- Challenging the thoughts can be very difficult – we are often convinced that our first impressions and understanding of a situation are correct every time.

How can I be sure that the identified thought is the trigger for the bad feeling ?

You need to ask yourself if believing the thought to be true gives rise to the feeling you described. Would someone who thought like this also end up feeling like this ?

How do I know if it is a *thinking error* and not a realistic thought ?

Would someone else in this situation feel the same way ? Thinking back to times in your life when you were not troubled by psychological or emotional difficulties, would you have felt the same as you do now in this situation ?

If the answers are “yes “, then it is likely that you have realistic beliefs about the situation. You may be able to think differently about how you will cope with the situation and about how you are responding, but this is not the same as challenging your thinking errors.

It may be the case that your feelings are the same as someone else’s in this situation, but they seem more intense - out of proportion to the event. This may mean that while your reaction is normal, it has been intensified by a thinking error. Challenging this could lead to a reduction in the intensity and discomfort of the feeling.

How will I know if my thought challenging is working ?

The last column of the Thought Diary is a test for this. Does believing the revised thought lead to you feeling different ? The difference may be a change in the type of feeling, or a reduction in the intensity of the feeling.