Challenge Cognitive Distortions

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There are many cognitive distortions, which influence our emotions and behavior. You are now familiar with the most common ones, those which most people have experienced at least once or twice.

Of course, there are also many other cognitive distortions, but ones you know the mechanisms for dealing with the most common ones, in a healthy way, you will also be able to cope with the rest. However, before we get to that, let's examine in more detail one unhelpful thinking style that is especially relevant to sleep disorders.

Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing, as you now know, means to magnify a relatively innocent situation and turn it into a massive disaster, with which we torment ourselves. Each cognitive distortion can interfere with your sleep. However, once you already have problems sleeping, it can be very easy to blow things out of proportion.

Let's imagine you are on the verge of falling asleep and you get a text. You forgot to turn down your phone's sound, and so you are wide awakened by its sound and screen light. Magnifying would be to think immediately that now it would be impossible to fall back asleep. You may toss and turn, getting increasingly frustrated with whoever sent the text, yourself for forgetting to put your phone on silent, and the circumstances, as a whole.

Of course, as you are now well aware, those frustrations will only intensify your problem and will make falling asleep even harder, so that you find yourself in a loop of cognitive distortions and further frustrations.

Is It All Bad?

Things may sound pretty dire by now, but there is certainly a thick silver lining to this dark cloud. Cognitive distortions can be turned into helpful, reality-based thoughts.

But make no mistake - it takes time, practice, and effort. These are therapeutic techniques and not magical formulas or miracle potions that work overnight.

Challenging Cognitive Distortions

Identify the Thought

Whenever you feel frustrated, angry, upset or experience any other negativity in your life, sit down for a second and write down the thoughts you are having. Try not to apply the filter of wanting to sound good. This may be hard to do at first because we all want to preserve a positive sense of self, but being brutally honest with yourself is the only way to help yourself.

Once you've written the thoughts down, you'd be able to attribute them roughly to one or two categories of cognitive distortion and then you'll have a wonderful baseline for making a change in your thinking.

Acknowledge Your Feelings

It's not enough to identify your unhelpful thoughts. Take a moment also to write down or say aloud (to yourself or a trusted friend) how they make you feel. Be specific. "Good" and "bad" doesn't give you enough information about your internal world. Are your thoughts making you feel frustrated, anxious, sad, lonely, or something else? Be as honest as you can and remember to get those words out of your head. That's why writing or saying them is so important - you'll get that liberating cathartic effect.

Look for Evidence

Sure intuition is important – it provides us with information from our past experiences, which may have slipped our minds. However, it is also crucial to understand if our thoughts are based on reality, or if they are pure distortion that's only getting in the way of both sleep and happiness. So, analyze if those thoughts are based on facts. Get self-critical and ask yourself: is what I'm thinking realistic or is it just a reflection of how I feel? Are there positive aspects that I'm ignoring? Am I trying to predict the future; do I have that ability? Is there a possibility

that I'm exaggerating?

Get Creative

Whenever you get stuck in negative, unhelpful thoughts, you're wasting energy. When you take some time for introspection, get creative and ask yourself what other ways there are to look at the same situation. Imagine this process like what you do when you give several interpretations to a song or a painting. Do the same with your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, and make sure that your interpretations are based on realistic facts. Things are not only black or white, and there are always plenty of sides to the same story.

Give Yourself the Best Friend Treatment

Imagine your best friend calls you, frustrated and hopeless, and confides in you with the same thoughts you've written down, the same problem you're going through. What would you say to them? Perhaps you'd console them and be kind so that they'd feel better.

Treat yourself like you'd treat a friend. Sometimes we expect too much of ourselves, and we don't give ourselves enough credit, thus ignoring all the positives in life.

Efforts and Rewards

As you already know, challenging your thoughts is an introspective process and not a magical solution. Things won't change overnight, or even in a week, but if you're consistent and honest in your self-questioning, you will see results sooner, rather than later.

"We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them."

~Albert Einstein