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The Downward Arrow

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Although it has a lot of physical and behavioral manifestations, social anxiety is actually rooted in our own flawed thinking. Automatic negative thoughts (ANTs), dysfunctional schemas and core cognitions are the 3 main components that will inevitably affect our day-to-day social interactions. But all hope is not lost because there is one simple and effective tool that can bring down this entire system.

An effective tool you can use is called 'the downward arrow' and it's used by lots therapists and other mental health professionals to treat all kinds of problems. From depression and anxiety, to phobias and OCD, the downward arrow proves to be extremely efficient against irrational thinking. In this article, you are going to learn how to use this highly effective tool.

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Quiz Time!

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Psychology 101 Part 2

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It's a Top-Bottom Approach, Focused Solely on YOU

The whole secret of this technique lies in the way you choose to approach your dysfunctional thinking patterns. It's called 'the downward arrow' because you start from the top and work your way to the core of the problem. You move from one dysfunctional thought to another until you find that one fundamental assumption (core cognition) which is responsible for your poor social performances.

What Causes Social Anxiety?

Most people are unaware of the fact that social anxiety is actually caused by a set of core cognitions deeply embedded into their psyche. They usually blame it all on other people's lack of empathy and understanding. The main goal is to bring your worries into the spotlight. The first thing you need to do is to focus on your own persona. Forget about your overprotective parents, hostile environment or any other excuses, because none of that matters right now. Instead, change your attitude by adopting a rational way of thinking because that's what 'the downward arrow' is all about.

It's All About the Why's and the What's

A rational person is someone who's constantly asking questions. Not just about the world, but also about himself. The human mind is amazing, but not perfect. It cannot process all the tremendous amount of information that we come across in a normal day. For those of us that are socially anxious, processing information in an adequate manner is even harder because of all the worrying and self-doubting. This is the reason why we often choose to accept some assumptions as universal truths.

How Can the Downward Arrow Help?

The downward arrow relies on two fundamental questions – WHY and WHAT. Why do you think you're not good enough? Why do you believe that people are going to laugh at you? What's the worst thing that could happen?

Why These Questions?

By using these two questions, you'll simply jump from one answer to another until you find the underlying core cognitions that are responsible for your social anxiety. It's all about finding evidence to support your statement (irrational thought). If you cannot find one piece of evidence to support your assumption, your mind will cease to believe in it.

Example

In order to make it easier for you, here's an imaginary dialogue between a therapist and his client. When practicing 'the downward arrow' by yourself, note that you'll be the therapist and the client at the same time. You can use a pen and paper to write down a similar dialogue between you as a client and you as a therapist.

Client: I can't speak in front of an audience.

Therapist: Why do you find it difficult to speak in front of an audience?

Client: Because people are looking at me.

Therapist: And what's wrong with that?

Client: Well, they're judging me. (Automatic negative thought)

Therapist: What makes you think that people are judging you?

Client: Because people are usually judgmental. (Dysfunctional schema)

Therapist: Assuming that people are indeed judgmental, what's the big deal?

Client: Well, they're going to make fun of me. (Automatic negative thought)

Therapist: Why would they do that?

Client: Because I'm a failure. (Core cognition)

What Does this Conversation Tell Us?

As you can see, the client's biggest concern is that he/she's a failure. That's the core cognition responsible for his/her poor social performance.

In the upcoming articles, we're going to learn how to challenge such negative, irrational thoughts and replace them with alternative ones. Before we get to that, we need to collect enough data to create a baseline for our intervention. In the next article, you're going to learn how to keep a thoughts journal.

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