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Think Outside The Box

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A very popular psychological framework to understand and tackle anxiety is CBT, or the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy approach. A licensed professional can help tackle your worry using this framework, but you can use some of the fundamental principles yourself, right now, on your own.

To begin, open a computer file where you could write, or if you prefer - take a piece of paper and a pencil/pen. Ready?

The banner features the Explorable logo and the text 'Quiz Time!' at the top. Below are three quiz thumbnails:

- Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2
- Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2
- Quiz: Flags in Europe

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Let's Go!

List 5 or 6 of your main worries in life at the moment. They can be anything from money worries to stress about a breakup, conflict with colleagues at work, or anxiety about a health problem.

Connect Your Worries to Your Thoughts

Take a moment to list 5 or 6 thoughts to correspond with each problem. What thoughts typically come up for you when you worry about this problem? Spend some time on this. The thing we're looking for is that thought that instantly makes your body tense up and merely thinking of it makes you feel bad.

How to Write Your Thoughts Down

Now, put these thoughts down. You could write, "I'm not making enough money and I'm going to end up destitute" or "She was my last chance for happiness, I'll never find love again" or "My colleagues all think I'm an idiot."

What About Your Behavior?

Chances are, these thoughts are going to be very negative and uncomfortable – but that's OK. You've looked at the "cognitive" part of the equation, what about the "behavioral" part? Well, take some time to think of the way you behave as a result of these thoughts you've put down. Do you stay at home and sulk? Stop taking risks? Procrastinate?

As you can probably see, the cost of having these thoughts is often quite high. If you wish to change the resulting behavior, you'll need to get to the root and change the thoughts that make the behavior possible.

What Can You Do?

With that in mind, your next goal is to try to moderate these statements so that they are more in line with reality. In other words, you're going to argue with yourself on these assumptions. Look for absolute statements ("always" and "never") which are just not realistically possible, and look for overly negative sentiments or thoughts where you've made assumptions that may not be true.

Question Your Thoughts

Below are some helpful questions you can use to examine your negative thoughts.

- Is your statement really true?
- Is it true all the time?
- Hasn't there been a time when it wasn't true?
- Is the statement true but only partially?
- Have you exaggerated?
- What positive information are you ignoring in this statement?

Change It Up!

You might change the statement "I'll never find love again" to a more realistic one: "It's possible that I never find love again, but more likely that I will, provided I put myself out there and am open to it."

What's the Worst that Can Happen?

Even if your statement is awful and happens to be true, carry it to its fullest conclusion. Let's say it really is true that you'll never find love again, worst case scenario.

Is it really so bad?

Is your life over, or can you derive lots of meaning and fulfilment from happy friendships, challenging work and a million other things? Even if you never had another relationship, is it really the end of the world anyway?

What to Do From Now On

The next time you catch yourself having the negative or unrealistic thought, deliberately remind yourself to replace it with a more realistic, less stressful one that is more likely to lead to productive actions. You don't have to lie to yourself or be overly optimistic, but often the thoughts that stress us are already distorted and an exercise like this merely corrects that.

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