

## What is CBT?

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is an effective approach for a variety of issues. It's based on the ancient philosophical idea that suffering isn't the result of what happens to us, but the result of *how we interpret* what happens to us. Basically, how we perceive the world through the lens we are wearing. According to CBT, it's largely our thoughts that lead to moods like depression and anxiety – thoughts about how things *must* be, how we *should* behave, how other people *ought* to treat us – and by changing our thoughts, we can change how we feel. In other words, we may need to clean our lens or change our prescription to see our world differently and create a healthier space for ourselves.

## What Is a Thought Record?

Thought records are one of many skills taught in CBT. A thought record is based on the premise that *you don't have to believe every thought you have*. Let's face it, many of our thoughts are half-baked at best and downright wrong at worst (and I'm talking about *everybody*, we are all mere humans) – yet we tend to accept what they have to say at face value. A thought record is a way of putting your thoughts to the test. It's designed to help you change your moods by finding a more balanced way of thinking about things. In short, you identify a suspicious thought and "put it on trial."

The end result of a thought record is a more balanced view. However, in my experience, the process of completing one can be just as beneficial as the end result. When you complete a thought record, you turn your attention inward and notice your thoughts and feelings. We are often so out of touch with ourselves that we have no idea what we're really thinking or feeling. The process helps you slow down and identify what's going on. When you bring such awareness to your internal experience, there's often a spontaneous shift in how you feel.

## The Process: Identify “what” is happening intentionally and with purpose.

**1. Situation:** Identify a situation in which you had a strong feeling or reaction or wish you had handled things differently. Describe what happened, sticking with the facts. Include these details:

- Where and when did it happen?
- Who was involved?
- What, specifically, happened?

**2. Moods:** Describe the related emotions, for example:

- Depressed
- Anxious
- Angry
- Guilty
- Ashamed
- Afraid
- Happy.

That last one may seem out of place, but I included it because I wanted to point out that one can use thought records for positive as well as negative situations. Contrary to popular belief, CBT isn't about "positive thinking." It's about finding more balanced and objective ways of seeing the world – which in some cases might actually mean seeing things *less* positively. For example, say you meet a new romantic prospect, and within a few days you're thinking "This person is perfect for me!" and "I've finally found the love of my life!" That's a case where a little less optimism would probably be a good thing.

After you've identified your moods, rate each one on a scale from 0% to 100% (don't worry about nailing down an accurate percentage – just go with your gut).

**3. Automatic Thoughts (and Images):** List thoughts and images that pop up in relation to the situation. These thoughts can be so automatic that we don't even know we're thinking them. You can start by trying to remember what was going on in your mind right before your mood shifted. Check out [Negative Thoughts](#) for more insight.

Here are a few typical examples of automatic thoughts:

- *I'm such an idiot.*
- *I can't cope with this.*
- *I'll never get better.*
- *Nobody will ever hire me.*
- *I'll never find another relationship.*
- *Nobody likes me.*
- *The world is a horrible place.*

Once you have your list of thoughts, identify the *hot thought*. The hot thought is the one with the most "juice" or "charge," the one most strongly linked to your mood. Circle the hot thought. This is the "**defendant**" you are going to put on trial.

**4. Evidence that Supports the Hot Thought:** This step and the next one involves gathering evidence. Your hot thought deserves its day in court, so list evidence that supports it. Since your thinking is currently biased in this direction, this step tends to be easy. However, it's important to stick with verifiable evidence such as facts, data, probabilities, and percentages. Avoid interpretations and opinions. Try to set aside your emotions, even though it's hard.

Let's say the hot thought is "*I'm always screwing up*" and let's say you had that thought after making a fairly minor mistake.

These statements would be considered "credible evidence":

- *I made a mistake that set things back by a few hours.*
- *I forgot a detail.*
- *I inconvenienced several people.*

These statements would **not** be credible evidence:

- *I ruined the whole day.*
- *I'm horrible with details.*
- *I could tell the people my mistake impacted think I'm incompetent.*

**5. Evidence that Does Not Support the Hot Thought:** Now take off your defense lawyer hat and put on your prosecutor hat. It's time for some cross-examination. Your hot thought likely has some holes in its story, and your job now is to find them. This step tends to be harder.

Your evidence against *I'm always screwing up* might look something like this:

- *I get things right way more often than I get them wrong.*
- *I made a mistake in the afternoon, but in the morning, I did two things very well.*
- *No catastrophe resulted from my error.*
- *I'm usually good at being careful.*
- *I apologized to the people my mistake impacted, and they assured me it was okay.*

**6. Alternative/Balanced Thoughts:** In this step, you switch to the role of judge. Weigh the evidence from both sides and try to reach a fair and unbiased "verdict." In other words, come up with a new thought or thoughts that represent a more balanced and realistic perspective.

For example, in the *I'm always screwing up* case, you might draw these conclusions.

- I make mistakes sometimes, but in general I am not careless or irresponsible.
- I am genuinely trying my best.
- The people my mistake impacted may have been a little upset, but there is no evidence they think I'm incompetent.
- I can improve my work based on what I learned from my mistake.

In the event that your hot thought is largely true, you will need to come up with a plan to address the situation. For example, if your hot thought is *I can't do this job*, and you discover that you in fact don't have the skills or support you need to do the job, that's a genuine problem you'll need to solve.

Next, rate how much you believe each new thought, on a scale from 0% to 100%. Often, how much you believe your alternative/balanced thoughts is related to how much your moods have changed in the next step.

**7. Rate Moods Now:** Rate your moods from Step 2 again, as well as any new moods. If there hasn't been a change for the better, review each step of your thought record and see if there are any places you could be more accurate, specific, or thorough.

## Tips for Success

Thought Records are hard work!! Changing your thinking is a process that takes time, awareness, and energy. But the payoff for your hard work is profound – you can actually restructure the way your mind works (in fact, in CBT the process of changing your habitual ways of thinking is called *cognitive restructuring*).

Over time you'll automatically think in more balanced ways and have fewer extreme moods. Your usual hot thoughts either won't arise, or you'll dismiss or dispute them as soon as they rear their head.

Here are some tips for succeeding with thought records:

**1. Don't be a perfectionist.** You don't have to do thought records perfectly. It's not rocket science or brain surgery. Just do the best you can and don't think too much. I know it's ironic that I'm advising you not to think when doing a *thought* record. But they are as much art as science, as much intuition as logic.

**2. Be patient.** Learning to do thought records probably takes about as much mental coordination as learning to ride a bike takes physical coordination. For beginners, it can be difficult just to distinguish between situations, emotions, and thoughts – much less identify automatic thoughts, figure out which is the hot thought, and collect and evaluate evidence. Be patient and keep at it. Thought records get easier as you go, and over time they become second nature.

**3. Decide on a practice and stick with it.** You have to complete thought records regularly and stick with them for a while to see their full benefits. There's no magic formula since everyone is different, but you'll probably need to do to at least 2 to 3 a week for at least 2 to 3 months. There are a couple recommended practices. One is grabbing a thought record and filling it out as soon as you notice a strong feeling or reaction to something (assuming it's practical to do so). Another is completing your thought records at a regular time – for example, each night before bed you can review your day and choose a situation you want to reflect on using a thought record. The important thing is to find a practice that works for you.

**4. Celebrate small improvements.** If a thought record has worked, your moods will change in Step 7. However, there may not be a drastic change. You may go from, say, 100% to 70% on a mood – but that can be a big breakthrough. Remember, the goal isn't to eliminate emotions altogether; it's to gain a balanced perspective in which your emotions are proportional to the reality of the situation. Be proud of whatever progress you make.

Thought Record Chart

Situations	Moods	Automatic Thoughts (and Images)	Evidence that Supports the Hot Thought	Evidence that Does Not Support the Hot Thought:	Alternative Balanced Thoughts	Rate Moods Now
I forgot to call a friend back	Frustrated, guilty, sad  60/100	I can't do anything right. I am not a good friend.	I forgot. I made a mistake.	I am a horrible person. They won't want to see me again.	I made a mistake, but my friend has seen me show up. Even though I forgot, I am human. That does not make me a total failure, it makes me human.	20/100