**Challenging Irrational Thinking**

In order to be in more control of our inner psychological lives, it is imperative that we learn how to challenge our self-defeating or irrational thoughts and beliefs. Developing our ability to distinguish between rational and irrational thoughts is the first essential step in challenging irrational thinking.

Use this pamphlet as a tool to develop your own skills of becoming aware of your irrational thoughts.

**What are irrational beliefs?**

Irrational beliefs are messages we send to ourselves that prevent us from growing emotionally. These scripts in our minds create the “rules” of life that we believe should be followed. Here is a list of characteristics of irrational thoughts:

1. Unfounded attitudes or opinions not based in reality.
2. Negative habitual responses we hold.
4. Unproductive ideas, feelings, beliefs, opinions, attitudes.
5. Biased and prejudicial judgements.
6. Self-defeating thoughts that lead to negative consequences.
7. Counterproductive ways of thinking.
8. Pessimistic ways of looking at life.
9. Idealistic ways of looking at life.
10. Emotional arguments.
11. Patterns of thinking that make us look stubborn and inflexible.
12. Thoughts with no context.
13. Confused thinking.
14. Ritualistic thinking vs. creative and realistic thoughts.
15. Unrealistic expectations.

**What do they sound like?**

✓ I do not deserve positive attention from others.
✓ I should never burden others with my problems.
✓ I am junk.
✓ I am untalented.
✓ I am worthless.
✓ I am powerless to solve my problems.
✓ I might as well give up.
✓ I am unappealing to others.
✓ No one cares about anyone else.
✓ All men are _________
✓ You have no control over your relationships.

Problematic Thought Styles

Here are some examples of ways of thinking that can be self-destructive:

- **Catastrophizing.** Seeing only the worst possible outcome in everything. For example, your child might think that because he failed his algebra test he will get an F for the semester, everyone will know he's stupid, the teacher will hate him, you will ground him, and moreover, he'll never get into college, and on and on. No matter what soothing words or solutions you try to apply, he'll insist that there's no remedy.

- **Minimization.** Another side of catastrophizing, this involves minimizing your own good qualities, or refusing to see the good (or bad) qualities of other people or situations. People who minimize may be accused of wearing rose-coloured glasses, or of wearing blinders that allow them to see only the worst. If a person fails to meet the minimizer's high expectations in one way—for example, by being dishonest on a single occasion—the minimizer will suddenly write the person off forever, refusing to see any good characteristics that may exist.

- **Grandiosity.** Having an exaggerated sense of self-importance or ability. For example, your child may fancy herself the all-time expert at soccer, and act as though everyone else should see and worship her fabulous skill as well. She may think she can run the classroom better than her “stupid” teacher, or feel that she should be equal in power to her parents or other adults.

- **Personalization.** A particularly unfortunate type of grandiosity that presumes you are the center of the universe, causing events for good or ill that truly have little or nothing to do with you. A child might believe his mean thoughts made his mother ill, for example.

- **Magical thinking.** Most common in children and adults with obsessive-compulsive disorder, but seen in people with bipolar disorders as well. Magical thinkers come to believe that by doing some sort of ritual they can avoid harm to themselves or others. The ritual may or may not be connected with the perceived harm, and
sufferers tend to keep their rituals secret. Children are not always sure what harm
the ritual is fending off; they may simply report knowing that “something bad will
happen” if they don’t touch each slat of the fence or make sure their footsteps end
on an even number. Others may come to feel that ritual behavior will bring about
some positive event.

- **Leaps in logic.** Making seemingly logic-based statements, even though the process
  that led to the idea was missing obvious steps. Jumping to conclusions, often
  negative ones. One type of logical leap is assuming that you know what someone
  else is thinking. For instance, a teenager might assume that everyone at school hates
  her, or that anyone who is whispering is talking about her. Another common error
  is assuming that other people will naturally know what you are thinking, leading to
great misunderstandings when they don’t seem to grasp what you’re talking about
or doing.

- **“All or nothing” thinking.** Being unable to see shades of gray in everyday life can
  lead to major misperceptions and even despair. A person who thinks only in black-
  and-white terms can’t comprehend small successes. He’s either an abject failure or a
  complete success, never simply on his way to doing better.

In order to challenge our irrational thinking we must develop a systematic way of
disputing these thoughts. Here is a 4-step process to follow:

**4-Step Thought Challenge**

Step 1: Is your thinking and problem solving ability being blocked by an irrational belief?
Consider a specific problem as you answer the following questions:

- Am I going in circles in trying to solve this problem?
- Is there something inside of me that is preventing or keeping me from taking the
  necessary actions in this matter?
- Am I bothered by the thoughts of what I or others “should do, act like, think, or feel”
in this situation?
- Do I find myself saying how this situation “should be,” having a hard time facing it
  the way it really is?
- Do I use fantasy or magical thinking in looking at this problem? Am I always hoping
  that by some miracle it will go away?
- Am I burdened by the fear of what others think of me as I work on this problem?
- Do I know what the solution is, but become paralyzed in its implementation?
- Do I find myself using a lot of "yes but's" in discussing this problem?
- Do I find it easier to procrastinate, avoid, divert my attention, ignore, or run away from this problem?
- Is this problem causing much distress and discomfort for me and/or others, and yet I remain stumped in trying to resolve it?

**Step 2:** If you have answered yes to any or all of the questions in Step 1, you are probably facing a problem or situation in which a blocking irrational belief is clouding your thinking. The next thing to do is to try to identify the blocking irrational belief. Answer the following questions in your journal:

- Is the blocking belief something I have believed in all my life?
- Is the blocking belief coming from the teachings of my parents, church, family, peers, work, society, culture, community, race, ethnic reference group, or social network?
- Is the blocking belief something that always recurs when I am trying to solve problems similar to this one?
- Is the blocking belief something that has helped me solve problems successfully in the past?
- Is the blocking belief one that tends to make me dishonest with myself about this problem?
- Is the blocking belief an immobilizing concept that sparks fear of guilt or fear of rejection in my mind as I face this problem?
- Is the blocking belief an immobilizing concept that can be stated in a sentence or two?
- Is the blocking belief a consistent statement as I face this problem, or does it tend to change as variables of this problem become more clear to me?
- Is the blocking belief a tangible statement of belief or is it simply a feeling or intuition?
- Can I state the blocking belief? If so, write it in your journal: My blocking belief is:

**Step 3:** Once you have identified the blocking belief in Step 2, test its rationality. Answer the following questions about the belief, yes or no.

- Is there any basis in reality to support this belief as always being true?
- Does this belief encourage personal growth, emotional maturity, independence of thinking and action, and stable mental health?
- Is this belief one which, if ascribed to, will help you overcome this or future problems in your life?
- Is this belief one which, if ascribed to, will result in behavior that is self defeating for you?
- Does this belief protect you and your rights as a person?
- Does this belief assist you in connecting honestly and openly with others so that healthy, growth engendering interpersonal relationships result?
- Does this belief assist you in being a creative, rational problem solver who is able to identify a series of alternatives from which you can choose your own personal priority solutions?
- Does this belief stifle your thinking and problem solving ability to the point of immobilization?
- When you tell others of this belief do they support you because that is the way everyone in your family, peer group, work, church, or community thinks?
- Is this belief an absolute? Is it a black or white, yes or no, win or lose, no options in the middle type of belief?

Healthy answers are: 1-no 2-yes 3-yes 4-no 5-yes 6-yes 7-yes 8-no 9-no 10-no

If you are unable to give healthy answers to one or more question in Step 2, then your blocking belief is most likely irrational.

**Step 4:** Once you have determined that the blocking belief is irrational, you are ready to refute this irrational belief. Respond to the following questions in your journal:

- How do I consistently feel when I think of this belief?
- Is there anything in reality to support this belief as being true?
- What in reality supports the lack of absolute truth in this belief?
- Does the truth of this belief exist only in the way I talk, act, or feel about this problem?
- What is the worst thing that could happen to me if I do not hold on to this belief?
- What positive things might happen to me if I do not hold on to this belief?
- What would be an appropriate, realistic belief I could substitute for this irrational belief?
- How would I feel if I substituted this new belief for my blocking belief?
- How will I grow and how will my rights and the rights of others be protected by this substitute belief?
- What is keeping me from accepting this alternate belief?

Try it!