

## CHAPTER 7

# Session 3

## Cognitive Restructuring and Identifying Unhelpful Thoughts

### Use This Core Skill for . . .

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- All youth to teach the core skill of cognitive restructuring and identifying unhelpful thoughts.

### Session Objectives

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- Introduce unhelpful thoughts and tie them to self-beliefs.
- Help the youth to identify his or her own unhelpful thoughts and to come up with helpful thoughts.
- Introduce the idea of self-beliefs (i.e., core beliefs) to the youth. Begin to conceptualize the youth's core belief.
- Describe the youth's attributional style for positive and negative events.
- Continue to identify unhelpful self-statements to target.

### Session Checklist

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1. Provide the parents with a handout on today's topic while they wait.
2. Set the agenda; elicit the youth's agenda; evidence check (for or against self-belief).
3. Review self-reports (looking for possible residual symptoms).
4. Review the previous session (Did It Stick?, elicit feedback and summary, discuss results of homework/practice, discuss any adherence obstacles).
5. Teach cognitive restructuring and unhelpful thoughts and self-beliefs.

6. Perform homework/adherence check.
7. Elicit feedback and Make It Stick.

In this session, the first 45 minutes of treatment will be spent with the youth in an individual session, followed by a 45-minute conjoint session with the youth and parents.

## INTRODUCTION

After going through items 1–4 of the Session Checklist, begin this part of the session:

*“It is easy to notice your feelings because that is probably what you are most aware of. It is key to recognize that there is a thought behind this feeling. For example, if you get a lower-than-normal grade back on a test, you may think, ‘I am stupid. I will never pass.’ Then this makes you feel bad about yourself, and this could make you feel like it is not worth trying anymore. The thought affects the feeling. Or, if you are at school and someone walks by and doesn’t say ‘hi’ to you, you may think ‘She doesn’t like me.’ But what if she is running late for class, or she didn’t see you? The thought affects how you feel about yourself, but this thought may or may not be accurate.”*

## RATIONALE

This skill will be needed by all youth who have dealt with depression. Actually, this skill would be useful for anyone who has ever had problems with “negative or unhelpful thinking” or has experienced cognitive distortions. Recognizing how one thinks and learning to identify the common errors in thinking will help to adjust these thoughts and to replace them with more accurate thoughts.

This skill helps to set the foundation for preventing relapse. In addition, this treatment focuses on self-beliefs, or core beliefs of the youth. By recognizing evidence for and against these core beliefs, the youth will hopefully be able to better manage his or her thinking and control his or her mood.

## TEACH

### Define Unhelpful Thoughts or Negative/Unhelpful Self-Talk

**THERAPIST TIP:** This section contains many suggestions for how to communicate this skill to youths. We suggest some possible language to use with youth

to introduce this idea. Use anything needed to get the point across, but don't try to use it all. Use your best judgment of what will work best with your youth. If the youth "gets it," move on to the end of the section.

### *Thoughts and Mood*

*"When you are depressed, you feel bad, and in this treatment we focus on two factors that help maintain negative mood: thoughts and behaviors. In this session we focus on thinking patterns. Noticing the way you think is important to managing your mood and maintaining wellness. When you have thoughts such as, 'I did a great job with that,' do you see how that would make you feel better? When one is depressed, sometimes one learns to think negatively and practices this more. We need to evaluate your thinking patterns to see if some adjustment is needed to further improve your mood to prevent relapse.*

*"At times, there are some situations we can't change, such as parents' arguing. But you can change the way you think about it and how you cope with the situation (i.e., behavioral coping skills).*

*"Today we are going to talk about thoughts. Last week we discussed mood monitoring and ways to change your mood with behaviors. Today we are going to talk more about ways to change your mood by changing your thinking. Remember, your mood is affected by your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. By working on changing your thoughts, we are also working on how to change your feelings, as thoughts can cause feelings."*

### *The Role of Thoughts in Relapse Prevention*

*"You feel better now, but there may be some leftovers of the old thinking from when you were depressed. This leftover thinking may be keeping you from getting completely well. Today we are going to look at different ways that people think while they are depressed. Then, if it is okay with you, we are going to look at your thoughts and see if any of these ways of thinking have become your style of thinking. We are going to do a 'check' and see if any of these apply to you, then working on finding helpful ways of thinking, to prevent relapse in the future."*

The language that follows may be helpful with youth who may need more examples to understand the connection between thought and mood.

*"Even though you are feeling better, you may not realize that you are thinking that way because it becomes automatic. For example, when you first learned to ride your bike (or drive a car, play basketball, play*

*an instrument), you had to think about every move that you made. You focused on each detail of every sensation, such as movement, balance, and feeling. Then, after a while, you could do it without thinking—it became automatic. That is how thoughts are. When you were first depressed, you may have started to practice negative/unhelpful thinking. With time, that probably became the way that you thought most of the time. It may still be how you think—an automatic way of thinking—and this could cause you to feel down again. We need to relearn how to think—maybe give you practice thinking in a different, more realistic way. With practice, this will become your automatic way of thinking.”*

### Changing Your Thoughts Is Possible

*“Have you ever ‘changed your mind’ about something? How does the change happen? Did you question your old thought or get more information about something?”*

- Introduce Handout 7.2, Risky Unhelpful Thoughts, and have the youth check those that apply to him or her.

#### SUGGESTED HANDOUTS

- ✓ Downward Spiral (Handout 7.1)
- ✓ Risky Unhelpful Thoughts (Handout 7.2)

### Strategies to Generate Helpful Thoughts: Thought Check

- **Check** to see if the thought is helpful. Check to see if the thought causes problems in mood (results in negative mood). *“When you experience a negative mood shift, that should signal for you to do a thought check.”*
- **Challenge** the thought: Connect this to the triangle. *“How does this thought make you feel? What behavior does this thought lead to? Is this thought getting in the way of anything you want to do?”*
  - **Contradictory evidence:** *“What is the evidence for and against this unhelpful thought?”*
  - **Alternatives:** *“Is there another way to look at this (alternatives)? What would you say to a friend who has this thought?”*
  - **Implications:** *“If this thought is true, what is the worst that could happen? What is the best that can happen? What is most likely to happen?”*
  - **Plan of action:** *“When you have this thought, is there something you could do to change the situation or solve the problem?”*

- **Change** the unhelpful thought to a helpful thought.
  - Components of a helpful thought: realistic, makes you feel better, not extreme, not emotionally charged, not blaming.

**THERAPIST TIP:** Beware of the “thinking trap”—“If I feel stupid, I must be stupid.” Remind the youth that Handout 7.3, Thought Check, is appropriate in this case. The therapist might consider using Handout 7.4, My Self-Belief, to work on unhelpful beliefs. The youth might indicate a belief about him- or herself that is particularly unhelpful, such as “No one likes me.” The therapist can indicate, using the circle as a pie chart, how much or what percent of all youth believes the particular belief to be true. For example, if it is 90% true, then the therapist can say, “*What would have to happen to get it to 80%?*” The therapist helps the child to find ways to reduce the belief—such as “I could go to the movie with a friend and I would believe it less.” The therapist can illustrate this activity as a piece of the pie chart that reduces the 90% piece to an 80% piece. This activity can continue until the pie has several more “helpful” components to reduce the percent belief.

#### SUGGESTED HANDOUTS

- ✓ Thought Check (Handout 7.3)
- ✓ My Self-Belief (Handout 7.4)

### Attributional Style (Ways of Explaining Things)

Attributional style can be twisted or skewed when one is depressed, and then people can get stuck in a pattern—for example, blaming yourself when things go wrong or not noticing or paying attention when things go well. Contract to explore with the youth his or her attributional style for both good things and bad things that happen. Research has shown that depressed adolescents have difficulty taking credit for positive events (i.e., depressed youth fail to make internal-stable-global attributions for positive events; Craighead & Curry, 1990). It is important for youths to “take credit” for good things that happen to them.

*“We find that when good things happen to people who are depressed, they say it happened because of ‘luck’ or external situations (e.g., ‘I made a good grade because the test was easy.’). It is important for us to watch for this. We need to make sure you give yourself credit for the things that you do well.*

*“I would like to make a deal with you that during the treatment, I can point out when I notice that you are not taking credit for the good things that happen to you that you have had a part in. For example, if you study*

*really hard and do well on a test, then tell me the test was ‘easy,’ I am going to remind you that you studied hard, and that is why you did well.*

*“Giving yourself credit for the things that you do well will help you to build positive self-beliefs, and these positive self-beliefs will protect you from relapse.”*

### **Self-Beliefs and Building a Positive Self-Schema**

*“We’ve been talking about how your view of yourself influences your thoughts and mood. We want to build a new idea of self that incorporates your strengths.”*

People have different ways of viewing themselves.

*“For example, I am a therapist, a mother/father, a wife/husband, a daughter/son, and many other things.”*

In addition, people have ways of thinking about themselves.

*“For example, I am smart, or funny, or serious, or likable.”*

These ways of thinking about yourself are called self-beliefs. These beliefs can be positive or negative (e.g., “I am smart” vs. “I am stupid”). Most people never really think about why they believe certain things about themselves, and that is too bad because these self-beliefs affect our thoughts, mood, and actions!

*“For example, I think that I am stupid, so I don’t raise my hand in class, even when I think I know the answer. What would happen if I believe that I am not stupid, or even believe that I am smart? How might my actions change? What would my mood and thoughts probably be like if I believe I am smart and try to answer questions in class?”*

Discuss with the youth that a main goal of this treatment is to think about these self-beliefs and to try to understand any evidence that we have for these beliefs (good or bad) and against these beliefs (good or bad). Show the youth Handout 7.4, My Self-Belief, to better explain this concept.

*“The ways that people view themselves can impact what they do. For example, if a person sees himself/herself as likable and fun to be around, he or she is likely to interact with other people. Self-beliefs (ideas or beliefs about myself that contribute to my mood, other thoughts, and behavior), both positive and negative self-beliefs, affect how we think, act, and feel. Let’s*

use this pie chart handout to think about 'how much' of you believes your most common self-beliefs.

"We just talked about a couple of beliefs you have about yourself. For example, 'I'm funny,' 'I'm stupid,' and 'No one likes me' [use actual examples from the youth, in his or her words]. What 'percent' of you believes each of these self-beliefs? Each of these beliefs is associated with different moods.

"When you say 'I'm funny,' your mood is much better. How can we increase the helpful self-beliefs and decrease the unhelpful self-beliefs? Both behaviors and helpful thoughts can change self-beliefs.

"If you want to decrease the 'stupid belief,' you can spend more time preparing for tests. In addition, you cannot minimize accomplishments (give yourself credit). Use the thought check method to address any frequent unhelpful thoughts about being stupid."

Common negative self beliefs include:

"I am unlovable."

"I am unworthy."

"I am not good enough. I don't measure up."

Use guided discovery to continue to uncover the youth's self-belief (e.g., "I noticed you said \_\_\_\_\_. Is that the way you see yourself?").

"Notice the good things you do. Which ones fit for you?"

Introduce the idea of monitoring helpful self-thoughts (or positive self-beliefs) and how these impact mood.

Apply the thought check model to the youth's negative self-beliefs, if possible.

#### **SUGGESTED ACTIVITY: Flower Pot Metaphor**

It may be helpful to guide the youth in understanding this concept by using the metaphor of a flower pot or gardening. If you fill the flower pot with rocks and sandy soil, then your plant will probably not be healthy and will have trouble growing to its full size. However, if you take time to tend the soil, add fertilizer, and pull out the weeds, you will find that the plant will thrive and reach its full potential!

Negative self-beliefs are like having sandy soil; no plant would grow well in this environment—think of the beach! There are not many plants on the shore!

Unhelpful thoughts are like the rocks in this sand, which inhibit the plant growth and mess up the roots.

Positive self-beliefs are the good soil, full of nutrients and life. Making positive attributions for events or "taking credit" for what you do is like adding fertilizer, and it makes your plant grow even better!



In this treatment, we would like to help weed the pot of the “bad stuff” (negative/unhelpful self-beliefs and unhelpful thoughts) and refill the pot with the good soil (positive/helpful self-beliefs) and fertilizer (positive attributes).

**THERAPIST TIP:** Continuously assess for the youth’s self-beliefs and attributions for events. This is key in helping the youth to change how he or she thinks about the self!

## PRACTICE IN SESSION

- Consider using Handout 7.2, Risky Unhelpful Thoughts, to help the youth practice finding the *unhelpful* thoughts.
- Role-play with the youth using yourself as an example. Give the youth a negative thought that you have had (e.g., “I was late to work this morning, so I am going to get fired.”), and have him or her apply the thought check model. Try to connect negative thoughts with negative self-belief, if possible.

## APPLY TO TIMELINE

*“How would these strategies have helped you in the past?”*

*“How can they help you this week?”*

*“How can you use them in the future?”*

If the youth has not already been able practice noticing unhelpful thoughts, help apply “thought check” to a specific thought that he or she has had over the past week. Go through the whole process with the youth’s thought. Have the youth identify the thought behind the feeling and do a thought check.

- Past: *“What are some thoughts that you had when depressed? Or, if you can’t remember, what do you think you were thinking back then, based on your symptoms? Knowing what you know now, could you talk back to these thoughts and change them?”*
- Present: *“Are any of these old thoughts still around?”*
- Future: *“Anticipate some situations for this week, and let’s think of some positive self-statements that could be used in that situation (e.g., if third period at school is bad every single day, then anticipate some positive self-statements to use during this time).”*
- *“Make and keep a list of positive thoughts or self-statements that might work for you.”*



## HOMework/PRACTICE

Collaborate with the youth to identify how he or she can use what was learned in this session over the next week. Be specific!

Suggestions include:

1. Thought record.
2. Make sure the Make It Stick includes common unhelpful thoughts for the youth to look out for during the week.
3. Use thought check cards: Have the youth make an index card with his or her common unhelpful thoughts and go through the thought check process with this card. Each unhelpful thought should have a helpful thought listed next to it. The youth can practice with these like flashcards.
4. Come up with some positive self-statements that could be used during the week. Have the youth anticipate situations in the upcoming week where these positive statements could be used. Incorporate positive self-statements into self-monitoring and the homework assignment.
5. Have the youth pay attention to the good things that happen in the upcoming week. Have the youth practice “taking credit” for these things.

## MAKE IT STICK

Have the youth share what he or she learned in the session and list these items on a Make It Stick Post-it note. You can add any additional points to this list. The youth may also give feedback about what was the most helpful from the session. Share what you learned about the youth during this session (i.e., reinforce the youth’s strengths).

In addition, you can create a postcard to send the youth during the week with the main points from the session. This should help the youth remember to practice what was learned in-session.

Suggested items for the Make It Stick include:

- Positive self-statements for the week ahead.
- Common unhelpful thoughts and helpful thoughts.
- Steps to thought check.
- Give self credit for events.
- Apply skill to a specific, personal example.

## TRANSITIONING TO THE FAMILY SESSION

Discuss the family session with the youth prior to inviting parents into the session. First, review what will be discussed in the parent session.

- Work collaboratively with the youth to set a workable agenda for the parent session.
- Determine what issues would be helpful to discuss further.
- Determine any issues that the youth does not want to discuss during the parent session.
- Get the youth's "buy-in" and collaborate with the youth on how this concept may relate to his or her family and be helpful in the youth's treatment.
- Have the youth think about how this new family skill might be applied to the timeline. Consider what the family can do to help support the youth in preventing relapse.

IDEAS FOR THE THERAPIST	
<b>Younger youth</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use vignettes.</li> <li>• Instead of common distortions, simplify into "red flag" words.</li> <li>• Which ones might he or she "catch" this week?</li> <li>• Ask permission to use Mom or Dad or a significant other to help the youth to catch the red flag words; can they "catch" them as a family?</li> <li>• Handout 6.9, Lift Your Mood.</li> </ul>	<b>Older youth</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use real-life examples.</li> <li>• Where are the unhelpful thoughts on this youth's timeline?</li> <li>• How can this skill be used to prevent relapse?</li> <li>• Have the youth consider how the self-belief gets in the way.</li> </ul>
<b>More behavioral</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State the thought and then rate the feeling in the session.</li> <li>• Have the youth teach the parent about unhelpful thoughts.</li> <li>• Use Handout 6.3, Feeling Faces.</li> <li>• Play Nerf football/basketball, having the youth describe thoughts after missing and making shots.</li> </ul>	<b>More cognitive</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use Handout 7.2, Risky Unhelpful Thoughts; which ones are familiar?</li> <li>• What situations does the youth anticipate this week where he or she might catch the thought?</li> <li>• Thought journaling.</li> </ul>

## **Family Session: Cognitive Restructuring**

### **AGENDA**

Collaborate with the family to set an agenda for the family session.

- Check in with the family on any previously assigned homework.
- Elicit feedback on the program and the past week. Continue to gather information on past factors associated with the youth's depression (particularly family factors) and their input on current residual symptoms and anticipated future obstacles (add these to the timeline). Continue to get parent input on treatment goals for the program.
- Elicit any questions parents may have after reviewing the parent handout. An optional agenda item is to have the youth teach the cognitive restructuring and unhelpful thoughts to the parents.
- Remember to prioritize the agenda items collaboratively.

### **TEACH AND PRACTICE**

#### **Introduce Cognitive Restructuring and Unhelpful Thoughts**

- Remind parent and youth of the cognitive model of depression and bring out the triangle.

*“In this program, youth are taught to identify thoughts and attributions and challenge and change unhelpful thinking. This same process can be very helpful to parents.”*

- Introduce the idea that negative/unhelpful thoughts run in families.  
*“Do you have any negative/unhelpful thoughts about yourself?”*
- Identify negative attributions that the parent has regarding him- or herself, the world, or the future. Be alert to opportunities to teach developmental norms for youth. Many adolescents exhibit thinking that is self-focused. This is normal for this age group and is not necessarily pathological.
- Parents often have unhelpful thoughts regarding their depressed adolescent. These thoughts can increase parent–child conflict and solidify the negative automatic thoughts of the adolescent.
- Use Handout 7.2, Risky Unhelpful Thoughts, as a teaching tool to show examples of automatic thoughts. Have the family brainstorm any negative/unhelpful thoughts about their family or about each other, such as “Dad is never home” or “Mom is always on the phone” or “My brother is lazy.” Have the family practice the thought check method, taught earlier in-session to the youth.

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## SUMMARY AND HOMEWORK/PRACTICE

Summarize the family session.

- Assess the family’s understanding of cognitive restructuring and unhelpful thoughts.
- Elicit feedback about the session.
  - “How is this relevant to your family’s situation?”
  - “How can I, as the therapist, be helpful?”
- Have the family summarize the session.

Collaborate to develop a family homework assignment. Homework ideas include the following:

- Contract with the family to have members point out to each other when they hear a negative or “unhealthy” attribution or statement. How can this be pointed out, without seeming critical? Have the family report back on some of these thoughts in a later session. For families with high EE, this may not be a good idea.
- Have each member of the family keep a mood monitor journal where thoughts are recorded. These do not have to be shared with each other but would serve as an exercise for individual reflection.
- As an experiment, have the family designate a “daily affirmation time.” Practice making affirming statements about each member of the family. Then assess the result of this on the family environment and the mood of family members. Designate a time of day when family members regularly get together (such as dinnertime).

### **DID IT STICK? (REVIEW QUESTIONS FROM THE SESSION)**

1. What are automatic unhelpful thoughts? What positive self-statements do you need to increase with practice?
2. Why should we “catch” them?
3. How are they important in relapse prevention?
4. Self-beliefs—What is my negative or positive self-belief? What can I do when I notice thoughts that contribute to my negative self-belief?

### CASE EXAMPLE: SESSION 3

In Session 3, the therapist and Lily reviewed the behavioral coping practice that she did over the past week, noting that her mood did improve after she took the dog for a walk or worked on her art projects. She found it hard to do the activities on days that she was feeling sadder or was stressed about her school work. The therapist and Lily discussed scheduling one coping activity a day and explored how to include parents in helping her to stick to this schedule.

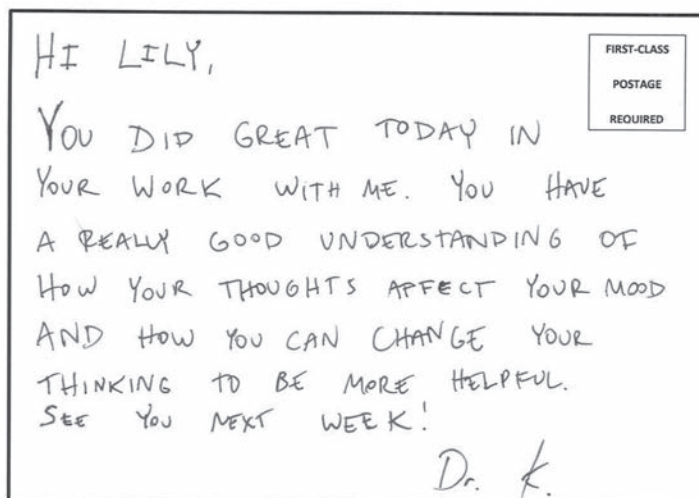
The therapist introduced unhelpful thoughts and their relationship to mood and behaviors and relapse prevention. Lily was able to identify several recurring unhelpful thoughts (e.g., “I’m stupid,” “My parents love my sister more than they love me,” and “I will never have friends.”). Lily was able to understand the connection between these thoughts and negative mood. In addition, she could link the thoughts to her behavior and current situation (e.g., “I’m stupid” would lead to not even trying to study for a test; “My parents love my sister more, so I am not important and don’t matter” would lead to her staying in her room and sleeping; “I will never have friends” would lead to avoiding talking to people at school).

The therapist introduced strategies to generate helpful thoughts, using the thought check skill. In the session, the therapist and Lily worked on the thought “I am stupid.” This is a thought that Lily could tie to increased sadness and hopelessness. The therapist and Lily used the check, challenge, and change approach:

- *Check:* The thought was unhelpful due to its resulting negative mood, as well as a tendency to “give up” or not try in school.
- *Challenge:* Several strategies were used to challenge the thought. Contradictory evidence was identified, including that Lily was a straight A student prior to her onset of depression. In addition, she recently has been getting good grades in her English classes and has only one subject that is difficult for her. Lily used the alternative thoughts strategy to generate helpful thoughts, including “I am able to do better work,” “I am good at many things,” and “Lots of people struggle in math who are smart.”
- *Change:* Lily wrote down the alternative thoughts above on a coping card. She set the goal of practicing saying these thoughts to herself whenever she struggles in math or feels down about school. In addition, she decided that she would spend more time after school on her homework. These alternative thoughts were added to the timeline (see Figure 7.1). Once she identified this pattern of thinking, Lily was able to plan ahead for when to use the thought check skill.

The therapist ended the session by planning for the family session with Lily and assigning a thought record for homework.





**FIGURE 7.2.** Postcard reminder after Session 3.

The therapist asked, “What unhelpful thoughts might be useful to review with your parents?” They identified Lily’s tendency to compare herself to her twin and her belief that her parents valued her sister more than they did her. In the family session, the therapist asked Lily to explain the connection between unhelpful thoughts and mood to her parents. She discussed her belief that they loved her sister more than her. Her parents and Lily used the thought check skill together to address Lily’s unhelpful thoughts about her role in the family. The parents were able to point out how at times it seemed that Lily ignored the positive statements that they have made to her. In addition, the parents identified some unhelpful family beliefs, “Lily does not want to be around us,” which resulted in the parents not planning family activities. The parents were more aware of Lily’s feeling criticized, and they made a plan of action. They would try to be more aware of her unhelpful thinking and would provide more support. In addition, the family planned two family activities for the week, and Lily agreed to participate. The therapist sent a postcard over the next week (see Figure 7.2), which included a review of thought check and a reminder to practice using her helpful thoughts and to follow through with the family activities.