

What is Cognitive Restructuring?

Cognitive restructuring is a useful technique for understanding unhappy feelings and moods, and for challenging the sometimes-wrong "automatic beliefs" that can lie behind them. As such, you can use it to reframe the unnecessary negative thinking that we all experience from time to time.

Bad moods are unpleasant, they can reduce the quality of your performance, and they undermine your relationships with others. Cognitive restructuring helps you to change the negative or distorted thinking that often lies behind these moods. As such, it helps you approach situations in a more positive frame of mind.

Cognitive restructuring was developed by psychologist Albert Ellis in the mid-1950s, based on the earlier work of others, and it's a core component in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). You can use CBT to control and change negative thoughts, which are sometimes linked with damaging behaviors.

Applications

Cognitive restructuring has been used successfully to treat a wide variety of conditions, including depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), addictions, anxiety, social phobias, relationship issues, and stress.

For example, a 2007 [study](#) found that cognitive restructuring helped participants who experienced severe grief, while a 2003 [study](#) discovered that it reduced the symptoms and effects of PTSD.

These uses are beyond the scope of this article, and you should consult a qualified medical practitioner if you are experiencing issues like these. However, you can use the technique yourself to reframe less serious, day-to-day negative thoughts.

For example, you can use it to overcome negative thinking before you [speak in public](#) , or to improve your mood when you have a bad day. You can also use it to think positively before you go into a performance review or a job interview, or before you engage in a difficult conversation. It's also helpful for overcoming [fear of failure](#) and [fear of success](#) , and for [beating self-sabotage](#) .

How to use Cognitive Restructuring

Download our free [worksheet](#), and follow the steps below to use the cognitive restructuring technique. This framework is based on the steps in Drs Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky's book, "[Mind Over Mood](#)," which is well worth reading for a deeper understanding of this technique.

Step 1: Calm Yourself

If you're still upset or stressed by the thoughts you want to explore, you may find it hard to concentrate on using the tool. Use [meditation](#) or [deep breathing](#) to calm yourself down if you feel particularly stressed or upset.

Step 2: Identify the Situation

Start by describing the situation that triggered your negative mood, and write this into the appropriate box on the worksheet.

Step 3: Analyze Your Mood

Next, write down the mood, or moods, that you felt during the situation.

Here, moods are the fundamental feelings that we have, but they are not thoughts about the situation. Drs Greenberger and Padesky suggest an easy way to distinguish moods from thoughts: you can usually describe moods in one word, while thoughts are more complex.

For example, "He trashed my suggestion in front of my co-workers" would be a thought, while the associated moods might be humiliation, frustration, anger, or insecurity.

Step 4: Identify Automatic Thoughts

Now, write down the natural reactions, or "automatic thoughts," you experienced when you felt the mood. In the example above, your thoughts might be:

- "Maybe my analysis skills aren't good enough."
- "Have I failed to consider these things?"
- "He hasn't liked me since..."
- "He's so rude and arrogant!"
- "No one likes me."
- "But my argument is sound."
- "This undermines my future with this company."

In this example, the most distressing thoughts (the "hot thoughts") are likely to be "Maybe my analysis skills aren't good enough," and, "No one likes me."

Step 5: Find Objective Supportive Evidence

Identify the evidence that objectively supports your automatic thoughts. In our example, you might write the following:

- "The meeting moved on and decisions were made, but my suggestion was ignored."
- "He identified a flaw in one of my arguments."

Your goal is to look objectively at what happened, and then to write down specific events or comments that led to your automatic thoughts.

Step 6: Find Objective Contradictory Evidence

Next, identify and write down evidence that contradicts the automatic thought. In our example, this might be:

- "The flaw was minor and did not alter the conclusions."
- "The analysis was objectively sound, and my suggestion was realistic and well-founded."
- "I was top of my class when I trained in the analysis method."
- "My clients respect my analysis, and my opinion."

As you can see, these statements are fairer and more rational than the reactive thoughts.

Step 7: Identify Fair and Balanced Thoughts

By this stage, you've looked at both sides of the situation. You should now have the information you need to take a fair, balanced view of what happened.

If you still feel uncertain, discuss the situation with other people, or test the question in some other way.

When you come to a balanced view, write these thoughts down. The balanced thoughts in this example might now include:

- "I am good at this sort of analysis. Other people respect my abilities."
- "My analysis was reasonable, but not perfect."
- "There was an error, but it didn't affect the validity of the conclusions."
- "The way he handled the situation was not appropriate."
- "People were surprised and a little shocked by the way he handled my suggestion." (This comment would have followed an informal conversation with other people at the meeting.)

Step 8: Monitor Your Present Mood

You should now have a clearer view of the situation, and you're likely to find that your mood has improved. Write down how you feel.

Next, reflect on what you could do about the situation. (By taking a balanced view, the situation may cease to be important, and you might decide that you don't need to take action.)

Finally, create some **positive affirmations** that you can use to counter any similar automatic thoughts in the future.