

Worksheet

Professional Version | US English

Thought Record – Courtroom Trial



Description

Beck's cognitive model (Beck et al, 1979) proposes that it is not events, but the interpretation of those events, which trigger emotional responses. The model implies that changes in emotion can be achieved by changing the thoughts that lead to them.

The CBT cognitive model describes different levels of cognition that shape an individual's interpretation and response to events. Moving from the deepest to the most superficial, these are:

- **Core beliefs.** These are understood as generalized statements that shape how an individual understands themselves, other people, and the world (e.g. "I'm competent", "I'm unlovable", "No one can be trusted", "The world is dangerous and unpredictable", "I'm adaptable").
- **Intermediate beliefs.** These are understood as a set of assumptions that guide behavior across different situations. They can often be stated in a conditional if-then format (e.g. "If someone is nice to me, it's because they don't know the real me").
- **Automatic thoughts.** These arise quickly and without any apparent effort throughout day to day life, often in response to specific events (or other thoughts or memories). Automatic thoughts are not facts, but they are so immediate and familiar they are often assumed to be true (e.g. your parent asks to speak to you and you think "It's bound to be bad news").

"Automatic thoughts... are situation specific and may be considered the most superficial level of cognition"

(Beck & Beck, 1995, p. 34)

Automatic thoughts that result in negative emotions (e.g. sadness, anxiety, anger) are commonly described as negative automatic thoughts (NATs). Some negative thoughts are accurate representations of the world (e.g. thinking "He could hurt me too" after seeing an acquaintance act violently would be both negative and accurate). However, automatic thoughts are often inaccurate – biased in characteristic ways – and there is considerable evidence that different mental health problems are associated with particular biases in thinking. For example, people who suffer from certain types of anxiety often 'catastrophize', and people who are depressed often discount positive information. Beck (1963) and Burns (1980) have described common cognitive biases which are outlined in more detail in our *Unhelpful Thinking Styles* information handout.

The *Thought Record – Courtroom Trial* tool is a cognitive restructuring worksheet. 'Cognitive restructuring' describes the category of techniques that cognitive therapists use to help their clients to overcome their cognitive biases and think differently. The aim of these techniques is not to 'think happy thoughts' or to replace negative thoughts with positive ones, but to overcome biases and to think accurately. CBT therapists use a variety of techniques to help their clients to develop cognitive restructuring skills, but a mainstay is the 'thought record'. Thought records exist in multiple variants, depending on the needs and abilities of the client.

Description

This worksheet is designed to help clients to evaluate the evidence for and against their negative automatic thoughts. It uses the metaphor of a courtroom trial, which can help clients to externalize, 'de-center', and take the role of an objective observer. The worksheet guides the client through the process of stating the negative automatic thought as an 'accusation'. The client is then encouraged to adopt the role of the prosecutor, stating the case for the truthfulness of the accusation, and the defense, arguing why the accusation is untrue. Once the client has examined the thought from both of these perspectives, they are encouraged to take the role of the jury: to weigh the evidence and come to a verdict on the truthfulness of the original thought. The final step is to generate a balanced opinion which fairly, dispassionately, and realistically represents all of the evidence presented. This format may be helpful when clients are able to identify their negative automatic thoughts (NATs), but struggle to identify evidence against the NAT and generate a balanced, more realistic alternative thought.

Instructions

Suggested Question

According to CBT, the way we think about a situation affects how we feel. We all have hundreds of 'automatic thoughts' every day that just pop into our minds. Often, they feel so 'natural' that we don't pause to consider whether they are true or not. That's a problem because our automatic thoughts can often be biased – we might be feeling bad because our thoughts have been unhelpful or inaccurate. One helpful technique is to 'put your thoughts on trial' and treat them like an accusation that is made in a courtroom. Would you be willing to try it with me?

Step 1: Put your thought in the dock (choose a thought).

To begin, encourage the client to identify a specific negative thought that has been troubling them. This can be imagined as an 'accusation' made against them.

Suggested Questions

- *Which negative thought has been troubling you the most this week?*
- *What went through your mind when you started to feel that way?*

Step 2: Play the 'prosecution'.

Present evidence suggesting that the thought is true. Clients should be encouraged to adopt the role of the prosecution. It is the job of the prosecution to convince the jury that the accusation is true. With this mindset, they should identify any evidence which suggests that the negative thought could be true.

Suggested Questions

- *In a courtroom trial, the job of the prosecution is to convince the jury that the accusation – this negative automatic thought – is true. What do you think the prosecution would say to convince the jury that this thought is true?*
- *What evidence supports this accusation?*

Step 3: Play the 'defense'.

Present the evidence suggesting that the thought is false. Once the prosecution has presented its evidence, the client should be encouraged to adopt the role of the defense. The client's job is now to undermine the credibility of the negative thought, and to present evidence which supports alternative perspectives.

Suggested Questions

- *Now it's the defense's turn. Your job is to prove to the jury that this thought is false. What do you think the defending barrister would say to convince the jury?*
- *What facts or evidence would a defending barrister use to discredit this thought?*
- *Tell the judge about a time when this accusation was not true.*
- *Try finishing this sentence, 'Objection your honor, this thought is not true because...'*
- *Who do you know that would disagree with this thought? What would they say in your defense?*
- *How could the 'evidence' presented by the prosecution be understood differently?*

Instructions

Step 4: Play the jury.

Review the evidence and reach a final verdict. Once the evidence for and against the accusation has been presented, clients should be encouraged to adopt the role of the jury, who has to dispassionately weigh up the evidence that has been presented to them. The jury's job is to consider all the evidence for and against the accusation. They have to set aside their feelings and make a balanced judgment based on the evidence presented:

Suggested Questions

- *Does the evidence show that your thought is 100% fair and accurate?*
- *Is your thought completely true, beyond any reasonable doubt?*
- *If your thought isn't 100% true, what is the reality?*

Step 5: Play the judge.

Summarize your judgment. Clients should be encouraged to consider the original accusation, reviewing both the evidence and their judgment. Finally, their task is to re-evaluate the accusation in the light of what they now know, and to state a new, updated perspective on the situation in question.

Suggested Questions

- *What would be an accurate summary of all the evidence?*
- *What is a more balanced and realistic way of viewing the accusation against you?*
- *How do you view your automatic thought after putting it on trial?*

References

Beck, A.T. & Beck J.S. (1995). *Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond*. New York: Guilford.

Beck, A.T., Rush, A.J., Shaw, B.F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive therapy of depression*. New York: Guilford.

Thought Record – Courtroom Trial

Accusation

What was your negative automatic thought?

Imagine your automatic thought is an accusation made against you. Next, from the perspectives of your inner 'prosecution' and 'defense', explore the evidence that supports and contradicts this accusation.

Prosecutor's arguments

What evidence suggests that this accusation is true?

- What information would a prosecuting attorney use to convince a jury that the accusation is true?
- Can you think of evidence that confirms you are guilty of committing this 'crime'?

Defense's arguments

What evidence suggests that this accusation is false?

- What information would a defending attorney use to convince a jury that the accusation is false?
- Can the prosecutor's evidence be reframed in ways that don't support the accusation?

Jury's verdict

After hearing both sides of the argument, would an impartial jury agree you are guilty of the accusation?

Guilty

The accusation is **100% true** beyond all doubt.

Not guilty

The accusation is **not 100% true**.

Summarize your final judgment

If you are not guilty of this accusation, what would a fairer perspective be?

Given all the evidence, is there a more balanced and realistic way of viewing this accusation?
Sum up what you've learnt from the courtroom trial.

Thought Record – Courtroom Trial

Accusation

What was your negative automatic thought?

I'm stupid.

Imagine your automatic thought is an accusation made against you. Next, from the perspectives of your inner 'prosecution' and 'defense', explore the evidence that supports and contradicts this accusation.

Prosecutor's arguments

What evidence suggests that this accusation is true?

I made lots of mistakes in my last assignment.

I didn't get selected for a class that I really wanted to join.

I've failed tests in the past, like my driving test.

- What information would a prosecuting attorney use to convince a jury that the accusation is true?
- Can you think of evidence that confirms you are guilty of committing this 'crime'?

Defense's arguments

What evidence suggests that this accusation is false?

There were errors in my assignment, but my overall mark was pretty good.

I've succeeded at things too, like getting into college.

I've passed lots of tests in the past.

- What information would a defending attorney use to convince a jury that the accusation is false?
- Can the prosecutor's evidence be reframed in ways that don't support the accusation?

Jury's verdict

After hearing both sides of the argument, would an impartial jury agree you are guilty of the accusation?

Guilty

The accusation is **100% true** beyond all doubt.

Not guilty

The accusation is **not 100% true.**

Summarize your final judgment

If you are not guilty of this accusation, what would a fairer perspective be?

I'm not guilty! I have failed at some things – but everyone fails sometimes and that doesn't make me stupid. There are times when I've succeeded too. I wouldn't be this hard on a friend, so maybe I should be kinder to myself too.

Given all the evidence, is there a more balanced and realistic way of viewing this accusation?
Sum up what you've learnt from the courtroom trial.

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