

# Guidelines for Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts

## Information for patients

Negative thinking can make life difficult by giving an unhelpful and unrealistic view of what is happening. It means that we can underestimate what we can do (our strengths and resources) and overestimate the difficulties that we face. It can lower mood so that we give up or don't try, or it can increase anxiety so that we find everything difficult. It can make us so angry that we push on through pain.

### Common unhelpful thoughts:

- Blaming yourself.....I ought to be able to do it
- Blaming others.....The doctors should be able to fix me
- Feeling overwhelmed.....I can't cope
- Self-pity.....Why me?
- All or nothing.....If I can't do it the way I used to I'm a failure
- Stuck in the past.....Why can't it be like it used to be?
- Worst possible outcome....I'll end up in a wheel chair
- Unable to move forward....I've tried before - it will not work
- Mistrust of others.....They are only saying it, they don't mean it

### 1. What is the effect of thinking this way?

- Is it helpful for me to think this way?
- Does this way of thinking help me to feel good about my life or myself?
- Would it be more helpful to think in another way?

### 2. What is the evidence to support my thought?

- What evidence do I have to support my thought?
- What evidence is there against my thought?
- Am I looking at the big picture or just the worst part of the picture?

### 3. Is there a more helpful way of thinking about the situation?

- What would someone else say about this?
- What would I say to someone else if they had these thoughts?

### 4. Am I seeing things as they really are?

- Am I catastrophising or jumping to the worst-case scenario?
- Am I thinking in black or white terms with no shades of grey?
- Am I focussing on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?
- Am I taking something personally?
- Am I assuming that because I feel depressed then it is true that things are hopeless?

#### 4. Am I seeing things as they really are? Continue...

- Am I blaming myself for something that it is not entirely my fault?
- Am I blaming someone else and not taking responsibility myself?
- Am I mind reading – assuming that I know what others think of me?
- Am I expecting myself or someone else to be perfect?
- Am I exaggerating?
- Am I assuming that I can do nothing to help myself?

#### 5. What is the worst that could happen?

- Realistically, how likely is this worst thing to happen?
- Even if the worst thing did happen, how much would it really matter?
- Would it really be a catastrophe?
- What is another thing that I thought would be awful?
- What really happened that time?
- It may have been unpleasant but was it really that terrible?
- What is the worst thing that has ever happened to me?
- How bad is what I am worried about compared to the worst thing that ever happened?
- How could I handle it if the worst actually did happen?
- Could any good come of it if it did happen? e.g. chance to practise coping skills
- How can I put this into perspective?
- Would it still matter in a month? A year? Five years?

#### 6. What is a more realistic thought?

- How realistic was my original thought now that I have considered the evidence and the alternatives?
- What is a more helpful way of thinking about it?
- Are there any solutions to my problem or any action that I can take?

#### 7. A more constructive process

- Recognise the problem
- Don't dwell on what you can't do
- Focus on what you can do
- Keep control and stay calm
- Increase the chance of success
- Have more confidence

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