

An Introduction to Cognitive Therapy

Has anyone ever told you that you don't live in the real world?

If so, they were right. You don't. None of us do.

We live in a world of ideas, interpretations, understandings, assumptions, beliefs, concepts, and opinions. We are connected to the so-called "real" world by our senses – our eyes, ears, skin, nose, and mouth. These tell us about the world "out there". Then it's up to us to make sense of it all.

We don't see the real world clearly. Our view is clouded by our past experiences. Your last three bosses were bad-tempered, so you assume the next one will be too – even though you haven't met her yet. Your fourth grade teacher told you that you were stupid, and you have believed it ever since. At five you almost drowned, and you have viewed the sea as an evil force from then on. Our view – our very *experience* – of the present is shaped by our past.

Many of these influences are helpful. But all of us have distortions in the way we see the world. We use "knowledge" that is false, apply rules that no longer hold true, impose meaning where there is none, and ignore meaning where there is plenty. We view life through the distortions of a fun-house mirror constructed over the course of our lifetime. In some places the mirror is relatively clear; in others the image is cloudy or reversed.

Research has shown that depressed people have a powerful set of negative biases in their view of the world, as though they wear a particularly dark and bleak set of sunglasses. These biases can contribute to a depression. The depression can also create these biases or make them worse. The problem can snowball: Negative thinking helps bring on depression, depression makes the person think more negatively, this makes the depression worse, which makes the negative thinking worse, and so on.

During depression, the biases and distortions we have carried with us all our lives tend to become more powerful. If you have often felt a bit inadequate, during depression you may become completely convinced of your utter worthlessness. If you often find the world a bit dull, during depression it will seem crushingly, oppressively bleak.

Cognitive therapy makes much of the idea of *symbolic value*. The events in our lives echo with events from our past and our ideas about the world. For example, a friend forgetting to say goodbye to us may be disappointing, but if it makes us feel awful then something else is going on. Our ideas about other people and our own worth are probably involved. Maybe she takes us for granted. Maybe she secretly doesn't like us anymore. Maybe no one else likes us either. Maybe they never did. Maybe all of our friends are frauds, tolerating us only for what they can get out of us. The pain is not from the failure to say goodbye, it is from the symbolic value of the event: what the event seems to *mean*.

But what if our interpretation of the event is mistaken? Then we have created a nightmare world for ourselves that may have no relationship to reality. It is here that cognitive therapy works: on the manufactured tortures we put ourselves through.

Lunch with a friend

Let's get practical. Think of a friend with whom you could set a date to have lunch. Who is it?

The morning you are supposed to meet you get a message that he or she has cancelled. No explanation is given. Perhaps the person who took the message was in a rush.

Now: human beings are *designed* to try to understand the world around them. You don't have enough information to figure out why your friend cancelled lunch, but that won't stop your brain. You'll try to guess anyway.

Knowing your friend, what is the first explanation that comes to mind? Why did they cancel the lunch date? Write your guess in the space below.

Are there any other possibilities? Come up with at least three more explanations.

1.

2.

3.

How you feel about the cancelled lunch will depend on your explanation for it. Imagine that you find out that your original idea was correct after all. If you knew this for certain, how would you feel? Excited, happy, angry, disappointed, sad, hurt, relieved?

Now imagine that the real reason your friend cancelled lunch was the one you wrote beside the number 1. How do you feel, knowing that this is why lunch was called off?

Next, imagine that it was reason #2. How do you feel? Then imagine it was reason #3. How do you feel?

Notice what you have done. You have created four different experiences, each dictated by a sequence: situation, interpretation, response:

Situation:	Interpretation:	Response:
Friend cancels lunch date.	She won the lottery and had to pick up the money.	Happy for her (and a little jealous).

Maybe at least one of your explanations wasn't so positive. Maybe you suspected that your friend got a better offer, or never really wanted to have lunch with you in the first place, or doesn't like you. The emotion would differ. In every case, we react partly to the event (it's disappointing to miss out on a lunch with a friend) and partly to the symbolic value (she hates me).

Thinking without thinking you're thinking

Hold on. The last time you felt bad, maybe you weren't aware of thinking anything at all. Your friend mentioned your weight problem and you reacted. You didn't seem to be going through a long series of thoughts about it. *"Aha, she mentioned my weight so it must really be showing, and if it's showing to her then everyone must notice and just not say anything, and maybe it's so unpleasant that it explains why I wasn't invited to the beach last week and..."*

Perhaps, as far as you can tell, you didn't do this. You just reacted. She said it, and you got depressed. But could you be thinking something and not know you're doing it?

Let's check. Can you type? Quickly, without looking at a keyboard or moving your hands: What's on either side of the letter 'X'?

Notice how long it takes you to answer that question. Most typists take at least 10 seconds. Some give up altogether. If you can type without watching your fingers, then obviously you have the information in your head, but it can be hard to find. When you're typing, you use your knowledge about the keyboard automatically, outside your awareness.

Can you drive a car? Do you remember the first time you sat behind the wheel and suddenly realized what driving involves? Keep both hands on the wheel, signal with one hand, change gears with the other, steer, work three pedals with two feet, obey the traffic rules, anticipate the actions of the other drivers, listen to the radio, and carry on a conversation. At some point it probably occurred to you: *"This is impossible!"* You were right. Driving *is* impossible. You can't do it – not with your conscious mind. Driving is too complicated for your conscious mind to handle. The only way to do it is to practice until the skills become so automatic that you don't have to think about them.

Some of the things that you now do automatically you learned with your conscious mind. *"The 'x' is down here on the lower left."* *"When the engine sounds like this, shift into a lower gear."* You picked up other rules without even knowing you were learning them, and they influence your behavior every day.

If you use ideas or rules for things like typing or changing gears, then think how many rules you must use for more complex situations:

- How do you know when to break in on a conversation?
- How do you know what is appropriate to say?
- How do you know whether someone loves you?
- How do you know whether you are good enough?
- How do you know whether life is worth living?

Imagine the number of ideas, rules, and concepts you must be using to make judgments like these. What are they? Where do you get them from?

We all have thousands of ideas about the world: understandings, assumptions, principles, values, guidelines. We use most of them without even knowing we are doing so. Fortunately, most of our rules are accurate and helpful. Every one of us, however, has at least a few rules that don't measure up. They are inaccurate, imprecise, or flat-out wrong. They lead us into biased decisions, into emotions more painful than they need to be, and into situations that don't work out for us.

Some of these negative, distorted rules are taught to us as we grow up: *"You're the stupid one in the family."* *"It's selfish and wrong to care for yourself."* *"When you came along you ruined our lives."* Other rules are picked up through experience. No one ever teaches them to us; we develop them based on our own discoveries. *"The way to get by in life is to be as invisible as possible."* *"I will lose anyone I love."* *"I'm worthless."*

So long as these ideas sit outside awareness they can exert a profound influence on your mood and your behavior. They color your perceptions of the world and shape your understanding. In order to change them or re-evaluate them, you must bring them into awareness and think about them, test them, challenge them. More than anything, you must catch them in the act of biasing your thinking. There are many tools for changing negative thinking, but all of them depend on awareness:

In order to dismantle an unhelpful thought structure, you have to know what it is.