Module 5: Control of thoughts

Most of our thoughts can be controlled, but they do not always follow our own will. It is normal for negative thoughts to slip in unexpectedly
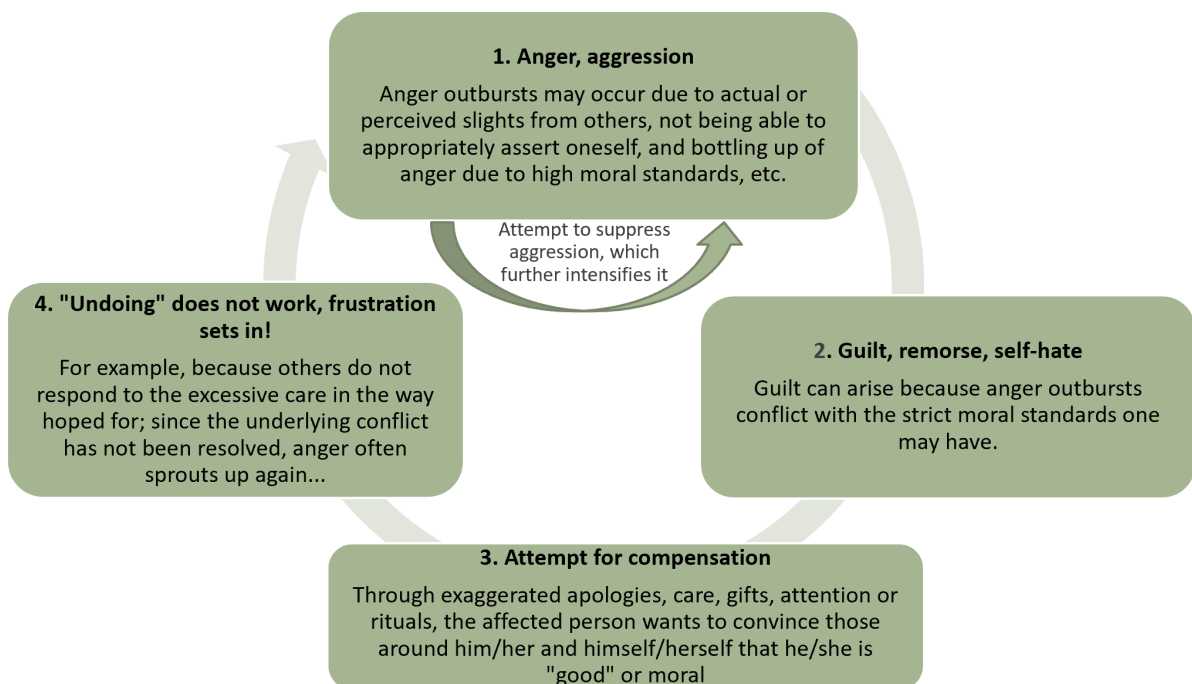
Thought suppression:

▶ When negative thoughts occur unintentionally, this often triggers negative feelings, so many people actively try to suppress negative thoughts
▶ Thought suppression, however, often backfires and paradoxically increases the intensity, frequency and vividness of thoughts
▶ This is especially true for negative and stressful thoughts, such as obsessions

Doing the "right" thing despite "bad" thoughts

▶ It is not necessary to suppress or correct "bad" thoughts
▶ Thinking is often automatic. Thoughts also arise when we do not want to have them or we know they are "bad"
▶ You can think something "wrong" or "bad" and still act "right" or "good"

Vicious circle: aggression – guilt – disappointment

1. Anger, aggression
Anger outbursts may occur due to actual or perceived slights from others, not being able to appropriately assert oneself, and bottling up of anger due to high moral standards, etc.

Attempt to suppress aggression, which further intensifies it

4. "Undoing" does not work, frustration sets in!
For example, because others do not respond to the excessive care in the way hoped for; since the underlying conflict has not been resolved, anger often sprouts up again...

2. Guilt, remorse, self-hate
Guilt can arise because anger outbursts conflict with the strict moral standards one may have.

3. Attempt for compensation
Through exaggerated apologies, care, gifts, attention or rituals, the affected person wants to convince those around him/her and himself/herself that he/she is "good" or moral

How do I escape the vicious circle?

▶ Express or address negative feelings in a socially acceptable way
▶ Question exaggerated morals

▶ Negative feelings or harsh words towards loved ones are not mortal sins, but are merely part of human nature.

Obsessions and aggression

▶ Aggression is a common obsessive theme (e.g., the fear that someone might get harmed) → Are often excruciating
▶ People with OCD do **not** tend to be more aggressive and violent than others

Alternative way of dealing with negative thoughts

▶ Distance yourself from the thoughts, by describing and labeling the thoughts without focusing on the content
▶ Do not actively try to suppress the thought, instead observe what is happening in your mind without judging it
▶ It's just a thought, an event in your head. It does not have to mean that the content is true
▶ See obsessions for what they are: obsessions – let them move on, like other thoughts too

How does this work concretely?

▶ Let the thought come in: Look at it from a distant position and tell to yourself "There's that obsession again", "I have the thought that I am to blame"
▶ Let the thoughts come and go without getting "stuck" on them, fighting against them and letting the content take you over too much
▶ Acknowledge that "It's just a thought – an obsession"
▶ Thoughts are not facts!

Exercise 1:

The following imaginings can help practice the fleetingness of thoughts and moving on rather than "getting stuck on it.":

▶ Thoughts as a storm: Imagine that your thoughts are a black cloud or an approaching storm. Watch it from a safe distance through the window pane until it has passed.

▶ Thoughts as air bubbles: You can also imagine your individual thoughts like carbonic acid bubbles in a glass, which seem to come out of nowhere, rise to the top and then disappear

▶ Thoughts as a theater play: Imagine a theater hall. Sit in the back row while your obsessions perform the same old story. This story has been performed for the umpteenth time. You yawn and leave before the play is over.

What thought exercise have you tried?

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What did you experience?

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Exercise 2:

Find helpful phrases for distancing. Examples:

▶ I know that this is an obsession and I will not pay too much attention to it.
▶ This seems threatening and urgent to me, but it is not at all.
▶ I am not responsible for that.
▶ It is a good exercise to let go of this fear.
▶ People make mistakes all the time.
▶ That is an unhelpful thought right now.
▶ A thought is not a fact.

What might your helpful phrase be?

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_____

In which situation did you use it? What experience did you make?

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Directing attention:

▶ Instead of suppressing thoughts, you can also consciously direct your attention, for example to…
 – another more helpful thought or
 – what you were about to do before being interrupted by obsession
▶ You can consider thoughts as a kind of "background noise". It is up to you which sounds you want to listen to!

Notes

Space for unanswered questions or problems that have come up or experiences that you would like to talk about in the next session:

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Other notes:

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