

# Metacognitive Therapy



## **THERAPY UNIT 9: DEPRESSION AND THINKING**

# What are signs of depression?

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???

## What are signs of depression?

- sadness, feeling low
- decreased drive
- low self-esteem, fear of being rejected
- strong fears (e.g. regarding future)
- sleep disturbances, pain
- decrease of cognitive performance (poor attention, memory problems)
- loss of appetite or increased appetite
- inactivity, loss of interest
- weary of life, suicidal thoughts
- ...

# Roots of depression: I was born like this... became like this?

Depression is usually caused by multiple factors. There is *no single cause*.

**Disposition:** There is evidence for a genetic predisposition of depressive thoughts and low self-esteem.

**Environment:** Critical and neglecting parents, early experiences of loss, and negative life-events can result in a negative self-image.

**BUT:** Depressive thinking structures can be changed! Depression is not an irreversible fate!



## Why are we doing this?

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Many people with mental health problems show thinking biases that may **promote depression**.

These thinking distortions can be changed through intensive and continuous training.

One event – many possible emotions...  
What leads to the different reactions?

**After a job interview you don't get the position you had hoped for.**

*possible reactions*

**angry**

**angry letter  
or call**

**calm**

**responding  
to other job  
adverts**

**sad**

**crying and  
brooding**

One event – many possible emotions...  
What leads to the different reactions?

**After a job interview you don't get the position you had hoped for.**

**evaluation/  
thoughts?**

**evaluation/  
thoughts?**

**evaluation/  
thoughts?**

**angry**

**calm**

**sad**

**angry letter  
or call**

**responding  
to other job  
adverts**

**crying and  
brooding**

One event – many possible emotions...  
What leads to the different reactions?

**After a job interview you don't get the position you had hoped for.**

"The human resources manager is just too stupid to realize that I am the right one for this job."

**angry**

**angry letter  
or call**

"I had back luck this time. But next time it will definitely work out. This was a good exercise."

**calm**

**responding  
to other job  
adverts**

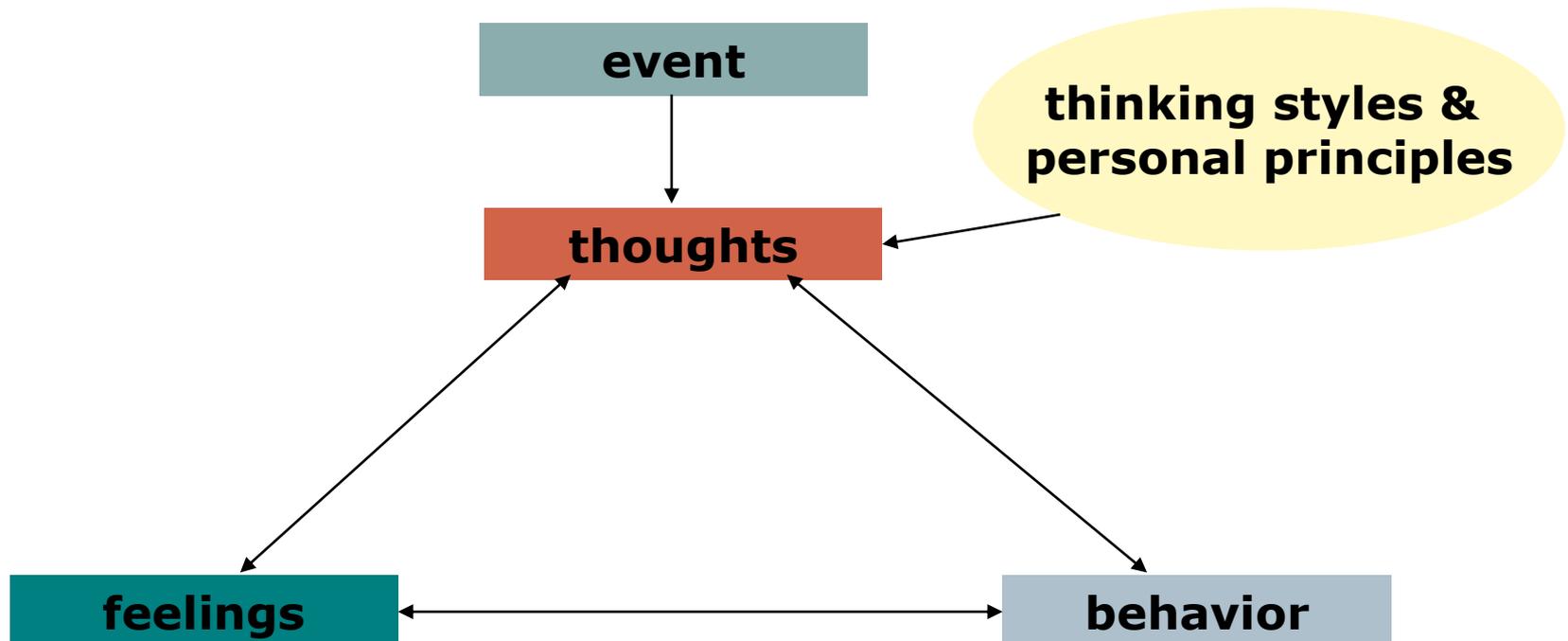
"I am not good enough for this job. I am a total loser."

**sad**

**crying and  
brooding**

## Link between thoughts, feelings and behavior

Many things lie in the eye of the beholder. People react completely differently to the same situation: An event alone does not determine what a person feels or how a person behaves – but a person's thoughts also play an important role (i.e. interpretations, personal assumptions and attributions). Thoughts, feelings and behavior influence each other.



# Depressive thinking distortions and dysfunctional coping strategies

- Exaggerated generalization
- Selective perception (“fly in the ointment”)
- “Should”-statements
- Catastrophic thinking
- Denial of positive feedback and uncritical acceptance of negative feedback
- Rumination and self-reproach



# Exaggerated generalization

- A *single* negative event is seen as part of a series of misfortunes (e.g. "this always happens to me", "I never get lucky")

**Do you know this?**



## Exaggerated generalization

What would be a more realistic/helpful evaluation?

<b>Event</b>	<b>Exaggerated generalization Positive/constructive evaluation</b>
You can't think of a word during a discussion.	<b>"I can never express myself!"; "I'm so stupid" ???</b>
You forgot your sister's birthday.	<b>"These things always happen with me. I am a terrible brother!" ???</b>
You are being criticized by a friend.	<b>"He doesn't like me anymore!" ???</b>

## Exaggerated generalization

### What would be a more realistic/helpful evaluation?

<b>Event</b>	<b>Exaggerated generalization</b> <b>Positive/constructive evaluation</b>
You can't think of a word during a discussion.	<b>"I can never express myself!"; "I'm so stupid"</b> "These things can happen in the heat of the moment. Other people experience this too."
You forgot your sister's birthday.	<b>"These things always happen with me. I am a terrible brother!"</b> "This is embarrassing, but mistakes can happen. Until now I have always remembered her birthday."
You are being criticized by a friend.	<b>"He doesn't like me anymore!"</b> "He had a bad day and took it out on me."; "Is he maybe right and can I learn something from his criticism?"

**Allow errors!:** Everybody makes mistakes from time to time. If you stammer this does not mean that you cannot express yourself. If you occasionally make a mistake, this does not mean that you are sloppy.



→ worksheet 9.1a

## How do you make a helpful evaluation?

1. Make concrete situational statements that refer to the here and now.

e.g. if you forgot your sister's birthday, instead tell yourself...

"This always happens to me. I am a terrible brother"



"I forgot the birthday this year. That is embarrassing, but I can still wish her a very happy belated birthday!"

## How do you make a helpful evaluation?

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2. What advice would you give to a good friend that experiences the same or a similar thing?

Example: You are late for an appointment because you noted down the wrong time.

Think about how hard you might be on yourself in this case. Then think about what advice you would give to a good friend. You would probably tell him that this is not all that dramatic and give some good reasons why his mistake is pardonable.

**Personal examples?**

# Selective perception (“fly in the ointment”)

- Separating single negative aspects from the overall context.
- Like one drop of ink that clouds a glass of clear water, everything suddenly appears black.

**Do you know this?**



Selective perception (“fly in the ointment”)  
What would be a more realistic/helpful evaluation?

<b>Event</b>	<b>Selective evaluation</b>	<b>Appropriate evaluation</b>
On the flight back your suitcase goes missing and you don't get it back until two days later.	“The entire holiday was a disaster!”	???
While you present own ideas at your evening classes, one person plays on their phone.	“No one is listening – my ideas are bad!”	???

# Selective perception (“fly in the ointment”)

## What would be a more realistic/helpful evaluation?

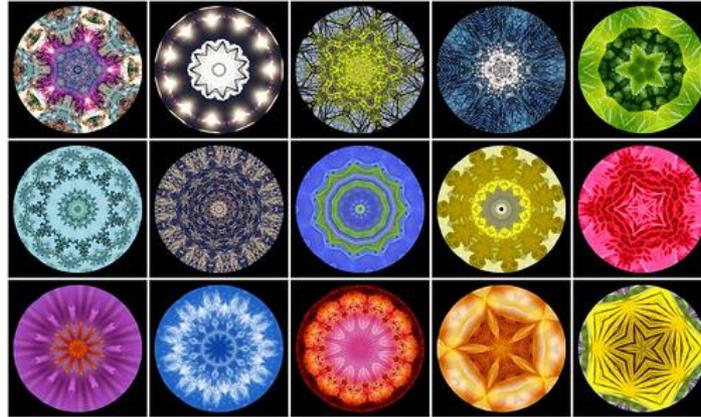
<b>Event</b>	<b>Selective evaluation</b>	<b>Appropriate evaluation</b>
On the flight back your suitcase goes missing and you don't get it back until two days later.	“The entire holiday was a disaster!”	“That is annoying, but we still had two great weeks in the sun. And the suitcase turned up in the end!”
While you present own ideas at your evening classes, one person plays on their phone.	“No one is listening – my ideas are bad!”	“For a little bit, I might be annoyed about the other participant. I am happy with my contribution. I will definitely come back.”

**Don't always look for the fly in the ointment!:** Don't overestimate individual aspects – instead, try to keep a “360 degree awareness”!



Instead:

Don't generalize one imperfection to everything!



Most human attributes are **complex!**

There are different points of view:

**e.g. What is intelligence?** Achievements at school, university degree, social competence, wealth, satisfaction???

**Like in the mosaic above: We consist of many facets that are both bright and dark!**

# Should-statements

Should-statements are excessive standards or absolute demands you place on yourself. They are rigid rules and norms that don't allow any deviation!

Typically, that involves thoughts like: "you should...", "you must...", "you ought not..."

Do you recognize this in yourself?

What excessive standards do you have?



## Should-statements

What would be a more forgiving approach?

<b>Should-statement</b>	<b>More forgiving approach</b>
"One should always keep one's apartment clean and tidy."	???
"One should always appear intelligent."	???

## Should-statements

### What would be a more forgiving approach?

<b>Should-statement</b>	<b>More forgiving approach</b>
"One should always keep one's apartment clean and tidy."	"No one is able to keep their apartment clean at all times. Besides, an all too tidy home can easily seem cold and sterile."
"One should always appear intelligent."	"Everyone makes mistakes, that's human. And it's precisely the rough edges and flaws that make someone loveable."

## More examples for should-statements

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- “You should always look neat.”
- “One must always keep it together and not let others see if one is feeling bad.”
- “You should always carry out your tasks perfectly.”

## Catastrophic thinking

### What would be a realistic/helpful evaluation?

**People with depressive symptoms often picture in their head that everyday situations end badly and that minor negative events result in disasters.**

<b>Event</b>	<b>Depressive evaluation</b> <b>Positive/constructive evaluation</b>
Your partner does not take notice of your new hairstyle.	<b>“My partner doesn’t find me attractive anymore and will break up with me.”</b> <b>???</b>
Your new car makes a funny sound while driving.	<b>“The engine is broken and fixing it will leave me with no money.”</b> <b>???</b>

# Catastrophic thinking

## What would be a realistic/helpful evaluation?

**People with depressive symptoms often picture in their head that everyday situations end badly and that minor negative events result in disasters.**

<b>Event</b>	<b>Depressive evaluation</b> <b>Positive/constructive evaluation</b>
Your partner does not take notice of your new hairstyle.	<b>“My partner doesn’t find me attractive anymore and will break up with me.”</b> “My partner could be far away with his thoughts. In the past he didn’t notice such changes either, it doesn’t mean anything.”
Your new car makes a funny sound while driving.	<b>“The engine is broken and fixing it will leave me with no money.”</b> “Calm down! Check if the sound reappears, and if necessary, stop and call the tow service. Getting it fixed may not even be costly and there should be a warranty for new cars anyway.”

## Denial of positive feedback but uncritical acceptance of negative feedback! What would be a more realistic/helpful evaluation?

It is typical for people with depressive symptoms to deny and reject praise coming from others, and at the same time pay increased attention to negative feedback.

<b>Event</b>	<b>Depressive evaluation</b> <b>Positive/constructive evaluation</b>
Someone tells you that you look good!	<b>“The person is dishonest and only trying to flatter me.”; “Well, it was dark...”</b>  <b>???</b>
Someone tells you that you look bad!	<b>“I am ugly...”</b>  <b>???</b>

## Denial of positive feedback but uncritical acceptance of negative feedback! What would be a more realistic/helpful evaluation?

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<b>Event</b>	<b>Depressive evaluation</b> <b>Positive/constructive evaluation</b>
Someone tells you that you look good!	<b>"The person is dishonest and only trying to flatter me.";</b> <b>"Well, it was dark..."</b>  "How nice that my looks appeal to others!" "What a nice compliment!"
Someone tells you that you look bad!	<b>"I am ugly..."</b>  "I look tired because I did not sleep well." "The other person may only be worried about me; I should not overanalyze this comment."

# How can I improve my reaction to negative feedback?

Think about criticism carefully and take into account different perspectives.

No exaggerated generalization:

“This is about a particular behavior of mine – not me as a person!”

Handle criticism positively:

“What can I learn from this?”



## How can I become better at accepting praise?

- Remember that people generally want to brighten your day and make you happy when they praise or compliment you – it's like giving you a present!
- If your response is to devalue the praise ("Oh, that's not true!"), you are rejecting the present.
- Therefore: Be happy and thank the person!



# Rumination: going in circles instead of moving forward

- Many people with mental health symptoms report endless “rumination” or “brooding”.
- **Have you experienced this too?**
- What do you ruminate about?



# Consequences of rumination

Rumination is problematic in several ways:

- Thoughts go in circles: Problems become more present, without being solved.
- Self esteem is undermined, as beautiful and helpful thoughts are disregarded.
- Unlike real purposeful reflection, rumination is characterized by recurring fruitless thoughts and self-accusations that haunt one's mind.



# Rumination and self-reproach – what to do?

## Experiment

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You have recurring negative thoughts (e.g. self-reproaches such as “you loser”, “you failure”, “you’re so stupid”).

### **Do you know this?**

What do you do when you have such thoughts?

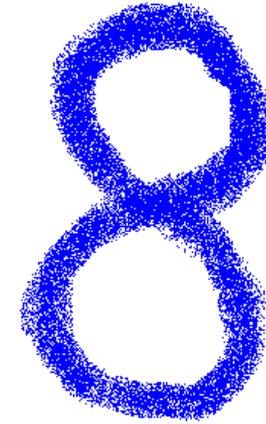
### **A little experiment:**

In the next minute, **by no means** think of the number “eight”!

Did you succeed?

# Suppression of negative thoughts

Does it work? No!



It is not possible to deliberately suppress (upsetting) thoughts. On the contrary: consciously trying not to think of something often leads to an increase in those thoughts. You probably thought of the number eight and/or of something that has to do with this number (e.g. infinity symbol, other numbers, etc.).

This effect grows even stronger if one tries to deliberately suppress upsetting thoughts like self-reproaches ("I am a loser" etc.). Those thoughts can then become so strong that they seem like foreign "inserted" thoughts!

## Rumination and self-reproach – what to do?

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The first and most important step is to identify rumination as a problem, not a helpful strategy. Rumination has been proved to cause more problems instead of solving them.

A ruminative thought is just a thought! Not reality!  
Try to be aware of the thought without judging it.

The following image can help with this.

## Anti-rumination exercise 1: Searching for inner distance...

Observe the inner events without intervening or judging yourself for them (“I am an idiot! I am ruminating again”; “Why on earth do I have this disorder”). Observe the thoughts like passing clouds in the sky. Don’t try to suppress the thoughts, that often only increases them.

The thoughts are not persistent because they are true, but because you are trying to suppress them and they scare you.



## Anti-rumination exercise 2: Physical distraction

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### Physical exercise

1. Stand up
2. Place left hand on right shoulder
3. Place right hand on left shoulder
4. Lift one leg
5. Move your leg in circles...

Concentration exercises like this one can help to break the infinite loop of rumination.

# Social withdrawal. How does it happen?

In depressive phases ...



... contact with other people can be exhausting.

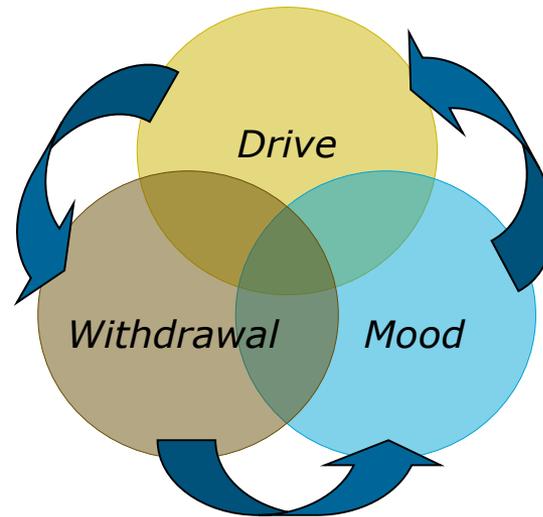
... one often feels misunderstood by others (“other people are lucky, their problems are not so serious”).

... the drive to do things is reduced.

... interest in other people (and their problems) is often reduced.

## Vicious circle of drive and mood

"I feel miserable. I can't bring myself to do anything anymore."



"I withdraw more and more"

"My mood is constantly getting worse."



# Vicious circle of drive and mood

## Try to break the vicious circle!

- Easier said than done! **But:** Try to overcome this and make a first **small** step forward.



- **Step by step:** let small steps (e.g. calling a friend) be followed by bigger ones (e.g. meeting a friend). Do not overstrain yourself!



- Fulfil your daily duties, but also do things you enjoy.



- You will see: more activity leads to a better mood and vice versa!



→ worksheet  
9.2 & 9.3

## Tips to improve mood and self-esteem

- Write down a few things (2-3) **every evening**, that were positive from that day. Then, go through these things in your mind (joy diary).
- Accept compliments and write them down to use them as resources when times are tough!
- Think of situations in which you felt really good and recall them with all your senses (sight, sound, smell, touch...), perhaps with the help of a photo album.
- Do things you really enjoy – ideally with others (e.g. go to the cinema or to a café).
- Work out (at least 20 minutes), but no drills, preferably cardio training, e.g. jogging or fast walking.
- Listen to your favorite songs.



### **Learning objectives:**

- Depression is not an inevitable fate.
- Be aware of the depressive thinking distortions just discussed, and try to modify them.
- Rumination and trying to suppress negative thoughts does not help to solve problems. On the contrary: this strategy even increases the negative thoughts and feelings.
- Social activities improve the mood. In depressive phases it is particularly important to keep in touch with people you are close to and to keep engaging in activities – even if it's hard (small steps).
- Use at least some of the aforementioned tips to improve and stabilize your mood.
- Report permanent and severe depressive symptoms to your therapist!

## What does this have to do with psychosis?

Many (but not all!) people with mental disorders debase themselves, show typical depressive thinking styles, ruminate, and withdraw. These thinking patterns and behavior often increase emotional problems, but also mental ones (a lack of social feedback can make someone get worked up into false ideas).

The discussed techniques are meant to help overcome emotional problems.

*What aspect of the therapy unit depression and thinking do I find particularly useful or helpful?*

*When and in what specific situation could I apply what I learned in the near future? What could it help me with (e.g. to feel less tense)?*

## What does this have to do with psychosis?

**Example:** Max has been feeling very depressed ever since he had an argument with his father during which they both said nasty things.

**Appraisal:** Max reproaches himself for having insulted his father, but on the other hand is too proud to approach him. He considers himself a bad son and even fears that his father could disinherit him and that the entire family could abandon him. He ruminates a lot and hardly ever feels like seeing other people, because he fears that they will reject him as well.

**But!:** The father feels bad too and eventually calls Max. The father is surprised to hear how much Max took the incident to heart. Max is relieved and wants to be less withdrawn in the future.