

*Helping
you to help
your child*

Recognising and Responding to Faulty Thinking Patterns

A guide for parents, carers and other
supporting adults



Introduction

Some tools that are used in the treatment of mental health conditions are incredibly useful and can be readily used by anybody in order to promote their wellbeing. One such tool is responding to faulty thinking patterns or cognitive distortions. This is a simple technique used to treat anxiety; but it can also be used to promote wellbeing and protect against negative impacts of anxious thoughts and feelings in all children (and adults).

The premise is simple; we learn about common faulty thinking patterns and we look out for them in our own thinking and when we spot them, we challenge them.

You'll recognise the common cognitive distortions I've outlined in this guide because we can all fall victim to them. By naming them and looking out for them, we can quickly reduce the impact they have on our feelings and behaviour.

We can all fall into the trap of faulty thinking patterns

Mental Filtering

Mental filtering is when we screen out the positive aspects of a situation and focus exclusively on the negative aspects. For example, the child who will instantly tell you what went wrong in their day when asked how things are going, rather than focusing on the positives; or the child who dwells on the mark they dropped when they scored nine out of ten on a test.

You can help by encouraging your child to flip their thinking and to look for the positives; encourage them to think about what they're proud of and what they enjoyed. You can also alter your questioning to specifically look for positives – so instead of asking your child how their day went, we might ask 'What are three things that have gone well today?'

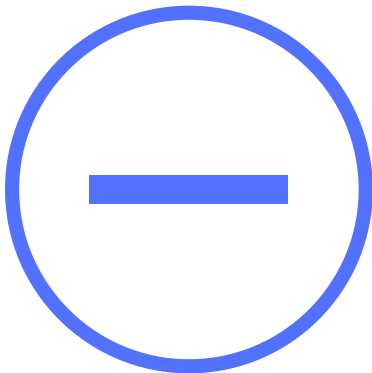




Disqualifying the positives

This is when a child readily counters any positive feedback or situations with reasons which mean it doesn't count, or is invalid in some way. So a friend being nice to them might be disqualified with 'It's just because they feel sorry for me' or 'They want something from me' or doing well on a test might be disqualified with 'I was just lucky' or 'I did well because the test was easy'.

You can help by actively challenging these kinds of responses – when a child dismisses their achievement as a result of luck, remind them that we make our own luck by working hard and that they should be proud of themselves.



Catastrophising

This thinking pattern is about seeing only the worst possible outcome by magnifying the negatives and minimising the positives. The child who believes that one poor grade means that they are going to fail their exams, never get a job and never be happy is one well-rehearsed example.

You can help by putting things in perspective and enabling your child to feel a sense of mastery and control over their future. Help your child to see the bigger picture and how small a part one negative experience may play in this; but also encourage them to realise that it is within their gift to change the way that things unfold and help them to identify how to make change happen.

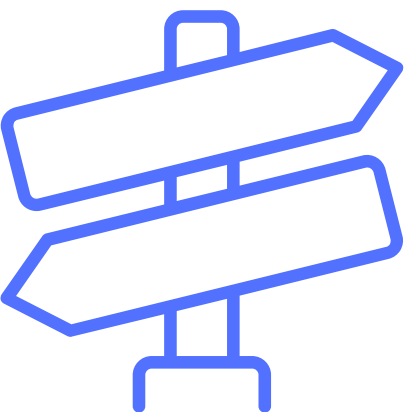




Shoulds and Oughts

Children who have an idea of how they should and ought to be, which conflicts with how they actually are, are a victim of this faulty thinking pattern. When we create an idealised version of ourselves that we continuously fail to live up to, this can impact on our self-esteem. Sometimes, the should and oughts come from children comparing themselves to siblings or friends, or by their belief of what parents or teachers expect of them. They might feel they should be good at certain subjects or they ought to look or behave a certain way.

You can help by encouraging your child to forge their own path and to recognise their personal strengths and what makes them unique. You can also directly challenge their 'shoulds' and 'oughts' – Why should you? Says who? Why does it matter? Would you hold a friend to the same standard?



Notice when faulty thinking patterns creep in and try to think a little differently

Recognise, reflect, role model

Help your child to recognise and reflect on their faulty thinking patterns and encourage them to challenge themselves, their friends and you when faulty thinking creeps in. These patterns can often emerge without us realising if we're not alert to them. Challenging and changing them can help to promote self-esteem, confidence and wellbeing. As well as encouraging children to recognise and respond to their faulty thinking patterns, think too about how you can role model this behaviour, and consider whether you're able to take small steps to promote positive thinking and behaviour patterns.

These are just some of the common faulty thinking patterns / cognitive distortions we can all fall foul of. There are plenty more where these came from and a whole host of practical ideas for breaking negative thought–feeling–behaviour patterns. This is the bedrock of cognitive behavioural therapy which is a rich vein of further research if this article piqued your interest.

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