Session 6: The role of thinking in causing stress

Cognitive challenging

Readings

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SUMMARY READING:

Goal of this session: In this session we explain how scarcity and personalizing thinking affects our reactions to hooks. We will also teach you how to manage and change these ways of thinking.

The goal of this session falls under the broader heading of personalising and scarcity thinking. We are now managing the thinking component of the reaction, namely scarcity and personalizing thinking. We have no direct management of the self-talk component as you will have noticed by now, that you have tried to change your self-talk already. You have been trying to talk more positively to yourself after a hook and you have probably been recognizing the hook and telling yourself to react in a different manner to it.

Scarcity thinking and personalizing thinking are two broad ways of thinking about stress or hooks. These are in fact distorted or faulty or abnormal ways of thinking because they cause us to look at the hook or to understand the hook in a distorted manner, and therefore we react to the hook in a distorted or faulty manner. Others have called these thinking mistakes or thinking distortions of which scarcity and personalizing are the broad patterns and there are ten different specific distortions that fit under these two broad ways of thinking.

The way we react to hooks or to the world in general is not determined by the hook itself, but by the way we think about the hook. Our behaviours like anger or irritation are motivated by our underlying cognitions or ways of thinking about the world. The time urgent perfectionists’ thinking is characterized by two manners of looking at the world. That is, we look at the hooks around us through certain lenses, and all that happens around us is filtered through these lenses and often clouded or distorted. If your glasses are dirty, things look different to you. Just like with thinking. If you think in a personalizing or a scarcity way, hooks are more stressful. These lenses or cognitions or thinking patterns are highly subjective and are our perceptions of the world and not necessarily the reality of the world. This means that many of us distort our realities in order to fit in with our thinking and behaviour instead of simply reacting to the hook accordingly.

This session looks at the role of thoughts in causing your emotions, time urgent and perfectionistic behaviour. People often make the mistake of believing that a hook is followed by a behaviour or a reaction. This is too simple! If we believe that, then behaviour is very simple. Look at the diagram below, the hook of a traffic jam will cause tension and anxiety. Traditionally, this can be described as a cause-effect relationship.
If behaviour was so simple, it would be as simple to manage and all people would react in the same way to the same hooks. But how come some people are not stressed by traffic? How come some people are actually very relaxed and enjoy traffic while they listen to music and make their calls? It’s because they think differently about the hook. They do not distort the hook. They think about it in a rational normal way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think like this about traffic?</th>
<th>Or this?</th>
<th>What is the problem?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we are thinking about the situation in a scarcity or personalizing manner, we get stressed. We respond or react to our thinking, not to the hook!

There is a thinking process or a belief system that operates in the sequence. Thus, our thinking or our attitude interprets the hook and then we respond according to the way we interpret the situation or hook. The person in the above example is personalizing the hook. This is a distortion. In order to look at this distortion in more detail, there are ten specific distortions that falls under the broader headings of personalizing and scarcity thinking (see Addendum: Cognitive Distortions). In terms of the ten distortions, the person in the above example is personalizing and more specifically, is using the cognitive distortions of Labelling and Jumping to Conclusions. This belief or thinking reaction or thinking distortion follows on fairly quickly and automatically after the hook. That is why people often miss it. They only recognize their discomfort when the reaction occurs. Then they try to deal exclusively with their negative responses to the hook, instead of also analysing their belief system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thinking is a barrier to appropriate behaviour</th>
<th>We need to find an alternate way to think</th>
<th>Or completely debunk our narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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You need to learn to recognize whether you are distorting your thinking. This is even more important than understanding what type of distortion you are doing. Because this is automatic, it is difficult to identify it until you ask yourself a few questions. On session 6, you already have your hook and your self-talk. Look at your self-talk, and answer these three questions with a yes or no:

- Do I have facts to support this thought?
- Will an objective observer agree with me that this thought is true and supported by facts?
- Would a non-time urgent and non-perfectionistic individual think the same?

Or the golden question: WOULD MY THINKING HOLD UP IN A COURT OF LAW?

Be honest with yourself. If you cannot answer yes to all three questions, then you are using one of the cognitive distortions. This happens 90% of the time. This determines your thinking or self-narrative about the hook is false and probably irrational. It would not hold up in a court of law. You need to think of a different way to think about the hook which would make sense to others too who are perhaps not stressed, time urgent or perfectionistic. Keep in mind, some hooks and the thinking about them might not be irrational and might make perfect sense. For example, if someone slams on breaks in front of you and you nearly crash into the car, it is rational for you to think “you inconsiderate driver, you could have caused an accident”. Most people would react that way and agree with you. Objectively, you are thinking rationally and should be angry with someone endangering your life. In this case, you would answer yes to all three questions, and you would not be using a distortion. This will most likely occur with real hooks.

You need to challenge your thinking by attempting to think differently about the hook in a way that ends in you being able to answer yes to all the three questions. On session 6 on the TUPS app, answer the question how can I change my self-talk in order to answer yes to all three questions? Type in a new self-talk that is more rational, unemotional and a logical way of thinking. Refer to Addendum: Cognitive Distortions in order understand the description. More than one can be applicable but the online stress template will only allow one per hook.
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VERY IMPORTANT:
Each session has to be open for a minimum of 7- days before you are allowed to move to the next.

There is a motivational 1- minute video clip per day, and you simply need to estimate your hooktime.

HOMEWORK FOR THE WEEK

- Scrutinize your self talk related to each hook
- Ask yourself the three questions
- Look at the cognitive distortions. Many do overlap so choose the one most applicable
- Now write down a way of self talk that survives all three questions
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DETAILED READING:

We are now at a point in the course where you are able to recognize, firstly, what causes your stress, and, secondly, how you typically respond in a stressful situation. There are a number of things we need to recap on for today – before we begin with the last half of the course which will be dealing with various techniques you can apply in order to reduce your levels of stress. Let’s summarise what we have learnt thus far:

- We now know what types of situations typically evoke our stress, our time urgency and perfectionism. These situations are called hooks.
- Our hooks may range from trivial seemingly unimportant events to realistic life threatening issues. What they all have in common is an element of learned stress that we inject into the situation. We thus make the stress more potent.
- Our hooks can be divided into those that are predictable and those that are unpredictable. The predictable stressors can be planned for and, in some cases, avoided before they cause any kind of distress.
- Hooks can further be divided into time urgent stress, perfectionism stress and realistic stress. We have learnt to recognise when each of these occurs.
- We then learnt to recognise our typical stressful reactions. We respond to stress or hooks in four different ways: behaviourally, with self-talk statements, thinking reactions and tension reactions. These may all be present in relation to one given stressor or only one may operate at a given time.

You may be feeling quite frustrated at this point in time. That is very normal, and expected at this moment. This is due to the fact that you now know what causes your stress, and you know how you typically respond, but you may be asking yourself “how do I change it?”, or “insight is not sufficient to change my behaviour”. This is true. But the beginning of any behaviour or other change requires awareness of that behaviour firstly. You have acquired awareness and recognition, now you can learn to change the behaviour. This session, as well as the last half of this course will focus on empowering you to change your stress via various techniques and coping skills. Keep in mind, that the more you practice these techniques, the more they will become automatic. Ultimately you will be able to apply them to any situation without having to think about it. Don’t be despondent initially. As with any new skill, you will need to practice the skill a number of times before it can be mastered.
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We would now like you to expand on the nature of scarcity and personalising thinking by giving it specific meaning so that it can be used in changing your reactions to the hooks or stressful situations. In order to understand this, you need to be aware that the stressful reaction to a hook - as it is filtered through tension, thinking reactions and self-talk – is not only time urgent and perfectionistic behaviour, but also emotions such as anxiety, helplessness or fear.

We want you to look at the role of thoughts in the causation of your emotions, time urgent and perfectionistic behaviour. People often make the mistake of believing that a hook or antecedent event (A) is followed by a consequence (C) or an emotion or a behaviour – which occurs in a linear fashion. So if we look the diagram below, the hook of a traffic jam will cause tension and anxiety. Traditionally, this can be described as a cause-effect relationship or a classical conditioning process.

Not everyone panics in a deadline. Many people get it done. They do not procrastinate or worry about the approaching timeline. The diagram above demonstrates the typical STIMULUS-RESPONSE model, which describes that certain stimuli or hooks result in certain responses or behaviours. Pavlov, a Behavioural Psychologist, showed that when he gave dogs food (stimulus), they salivated (response) (more detail in the video for this session). His contribution to psychology, however, was that when he paired the giving of the food with the ringing of a bell, the dogs eventually learned to salivate when simply hearing the ringing of the bell.
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So, in essence, he was saying that we condition ourselves to react to certain hooks in certain ways. This reaction becomes *automatic* and *habit-forming*. Just like Pavlov’s dogs, we automatically get tense with a deadline. If changing behaviour was so easy, one would simply introduce a relaxation response as you get the deadline or whilst thinking about the deadline (as Pavlov introduced the bell for the dogs), and, seemingly, that would take care of the anxiety or tension. Eventually – via a slightly more complicated process – the deadline gets associated with relaxation. But is in not that simple.

Traditionally, the above is what stress management courses have focused on. They have tried to change the *behaviour or emotion* that follows a stressful situation, instead of looking at the thinking. People then leave the course and practice their relaxation or their assertiveness training techniques – and these work for a while – but then something else comes into play – our thinking about the hook!

This was the origin of **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy**. We cannot change hooks, but we can change the way we think about them. Our narrative is what makes us react the way we do, not necessarily the hook. We may have no control over the hook, but we can change our thinking pattern.

As can be seen from the diagram above, there is a *thinking process*, a *narrative* or a *belief system* that operates in the sequence. Thus, our thinking or our attitude interprets the hook or stressor and then we respond according to the way we interpret the situation or hook. So our thinking is basically like a pair of glasses that we look through. Depending on the strength of the lenses, we will see the world differently. Our glasses can either give us a clear depiction of what we are looking at, or they can distort our view.
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All hooks are filtered through a belief system, which is highly subjective, and dictates our reality. This belief system has been established through years of practice and by learning from others - as we looked at when compiling our stress profiles. It is a belief system that we seem to apply to most of our hooks. Thus, it is a filter through which we interpret our realities.

Let’s look at the example of a deadline. A time urgent perfectionist might be given a deadline– the hook – and will then think to himself “how will I ever finish this? I have too much to do. I will never finish on time.” Of course that type of thinking and interpretation of the hook will cause a tense and anxious reaction as well as time urgent and perfectionistic behaviour as a consequence like panic, constant worry and even procrastination. However, someone who is regarded as easy going and relaxed might be faced with the same hook but will say “let me start the deadline now. I have always finished on time. My work has never been criticized.” Or they will think: “I have always been a procrastinator. But I finish the deadline. Instead of spending days worrying about it, let me do it now or stop worrying until the urgency is non-negotiable.” Can you see how this type of filter might produce a totally different reaction? The second person will continue to work in a calmer, more relaxed manner, secrete less of the stress-inducing hormones and ultimately reduce their hooktime.

This belief or thinking reaction (B) follows on fairly quickly and automatically after the hook. That is why people often miss it. They only recognize their discomfort when the reaction (C) occurs. Then they try to deal exclusively with their negative responses to the hook, instead of also analysing their belief system.

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

You need to learn to look at these belief systems and then to assess just how this thinking operates in the causation and maintenance of your emotions and stressful reactions.
This belief system that we are addressing in today’s session, includes the scarcity and personalizing thinking that we addressed previously. However, today we will look at scarcity and personalizing thinking in more detail. Scarcity and personalizing are the two broad categories of thinking but they have sub-headings underneath them, which describe the specific pattern of thinking in more detail.

Please look at session 6 on the TUPS app. We have listed the different ways one can distort their reality. We call these distortions of thinking. Each of the distortions listed can either be placed under the general heading of scarcity or personalizing thinking. Keep in mind, what was taught to you in session 3, that personalizing thinking is when you internalize the thinking or take the event or hook exceptionally personally. Scarcity thinking is when you externalize the reason for the hook.

For homework, we would like you to firstly identify if you are in fact distorting. This is the most important step and then one can change the self-talk. The actual distortion is less important than recognizing that one is actually distorting. With some hooks, you may be using more than one distortion, but we are interested in the one used most at the time for ease of the course. Remember that this is a difficult exercise to do as you feel your thinking is rational.
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You need to check your thinking with reality. Ask yourself questions like “does everyone think this way or is it only me?”, “if I knew I was going to die next week, would I still think this way?”, “would this thinking be valid in a court of law?” You need to write down the ways in which you could have changed your thinking in order to result in a more positive emotion or consequence. As you read on towards the end of this session, you will be provided with a more complete structure of questions to be asked in relation to each distortion in order to challenge it.

Look at the TUPS app, session 6. You have a list of your hooks as well as your negative self-talk about the hook. This is followed by three questions:

- Do I have facts to support this thought?
- Will an objective observer agree with me that this thought is true and supported by facts?
- Would a non-time urgent and non-perfectionistic individual think the same?

If you are finding it difficult to answer the questions, it may mean that you should simply expand on your self-talk a bit more. If you cannot answer yes to all three questions, then you are distorting your thinking. *If my distorted thought does not survive these questions, it is false and useless in my life – except to provide me with stress that will harm me.* Practically, this means that if you answer no to all these questions, then your thinking is clearly distorted or irrational and probably due to your time urgent and perfectionistic nature. You need to keep asking yourself these 3 questions until you are able to answer yes to all the questions. That thought or way of thinking is then a rational manner of thinking and must be written under the last question for session 6. This new way of thinking about the hook is hopefully more rational, objective and factual. Your new self-talk is more likely to be a healthier, less stressful way of thinking about the hook.

Below are a few examples of hooks with distorted ways of thinking (negative thoughts and feelings) followed by the distortion used, and finally, indicating more rational ways of thinking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hook</th>
<th>My Negative Thoughts and Feelings</th>
<th>Do I have facts to support this thought?</th>
<th>Will an objective observer agree with me that this thought is true and supported by facts?</th>
<th>Would a non-time urgent and non-perfectionistic individual think the same?</th>
<th>Cognitive Distortion</th>
<th>How can I think differently about the hook?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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As can be seen from the table above, this individual tends to use the following cognitive distortions most often: Labelling and should statements. She also tends to use personalizing distortions most often. This can be seen in her self-talk statements where she tends to attribute blame to herself rather than to others or to events beyond her control.

When looking at the last column entitled “how can I think differently about the hook?”; you can see that the statement there is:

- More objective;
- More rational;
- More factual;
- Is able to evoke a “yes” answer to the three questions above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict with someone at work</th>
<th>Why can’t I ever manage to say the right thing?</th>
<th>No. I sometimes manage conflict well</th>
<th>Maybe others would have thought I could have managed better</th>
<th>No. They would not worry about it beyond the conflict and would probably apologize and move on</th>
<th>Overgeneralization, All-or-nothing, Magnification</th>
<th>This was a threatening situation, I was not prepared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late for an appointment</td>
<td>I should have left earlier. I’m an idiot</td>
<td>Maybe to first statement of leaving earlier</td>
<td>Possibly to first statement of leaving earlier</td>
<td>No. They would phone and let their colleagues know</td>
<td>Labelling, Should statements</td>
<td>I couldn’t have predicted the traffic. I must judge my time more accurately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivered a sub-standard document</td>
<td>This is not going to be well received. They will think I was lazy and inefficient</td>
<td>No. I haven’t received negative feedback.</td>
<td>No. I managed to meet the deadline and worked hard</td>
<td>No. I met the deadline and can work on it further or take the negative feedback constructively</td>
<td>Jumping to conclusions, Labelling</td>
<td>This is just one task. I will do better in the rest. I haven’t received any negative feedback as yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticized by a friend</td>
<td>I am not a good friend. How can she say that? I feel terrible about myself</td>
<td>No. The critique was not necessarily right or given constructively. I have always been a good friend</td>
<td>No. The critique was unjustified</td>
<td>No. They would approach the person or not worry about it indefinitely</td>
<td>Mental filter, Labelling</td>
<td>Why do other friends say I am reliable and trustworthy? Maybe she had a bad day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some people manage to identify that they are distorting their thinking. That means that their way of thinking about the hook cannot hold up to the three questions asked. They even go so far as to identify the distortion they are using. However, they struggle to challenge their thinking and to change it to a more rational, less stress-provoking manner of thinking about the hook.

Remember that even though you do most of these changes in hindsight, that is, after the hook has happened, they are highlighting your typical ways of thinking. Given some time and practice, you will automatically be asking yourself, “am I jumping to a conclusion?”, “am I taking this too personally?”, “would others agree that I am thinking rationally?”.

**Our ultimate aim**

- Imagine the wall is our self-talk

- We might be trying to avoid the triggers, but our self-talk is the barrier

- We try very hard to find ways to challenge it, but built over years and has become our narrative and automatic

- There are many ways we can talk about a hook
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- We need to challenge this wall and change the way we talk to ourselves

Our ultimate result

- Change habit to awareness

- Initially seems obvious, but with time and practice, these negative cognitions start changing automatically

- 90% of your hooks repeat themselves. With time, you will learn to think a different way
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- It will become harder to ignore your distortions

- With time, the more rational way of thinking will emerge
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## Addendum 1: Cognitive distortions and their definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTORTION</th>
<th>EXPLANATION</th>
<th>YES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LABELING</td>
<td>Instead of saying &quot;I made a mistake&quot;, you attach a label to yourself and/or others and say &quot;I am a failure.&quot; You make an impulsive judgment of a context in which you either label yourself or someone else.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERGENERALIZATION</td>
<td>One single negative event is seen as a never-ending pattern of defect. You use words such as &quot;always&quot; and &quot;never&quot; when thinking about it. A single event or hook creates a sense of helplessness for the future.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSONALIZATION &amp; BLAME</td>
<td>You hold yourself personally responsible for things beyond your control. At times, you may blame others.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVE</td>
<td>You reject positive experiences by insisting they don’t count. You always feel you could have done better, which leaves you feeling unrewarded. You may find it difficult to accept a compliment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;SHOULD&quot; STATEMENTS</td>
<td>You reflect back and say &quot;I should have...&quot; and &quot;I could have...&quot; in relation to a hook which leaves you feeling guilty and frustrated. You think and worry about how you could have managed it differently.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAGNIFICATION</td>
<td>You exaggerate your shortcomings, and play down your positive qualities and attributes. Your faults seem to outweigh your good points.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMOTIONAL REASONING</td>
<td>You think that unpleasant emotions reflect the reality of the way things are. If you are feeling down or depressed, the rest of the day appears depressing. Your mood dictates how you feel in relation to most hooks for that day.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>You perceive things to be negative, even when there are no facts to support your conclusions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL-OR-NOTHING</td>
<td>Things are divided into black and white. If something falls short of your expectations, you see yourself, and the whole situation, as a failure.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENTAL FILTER</td>
<td>You pick out a single negative event and dwell on it exclusively. Your colleagues are all impressed with your work, and one gives negative feedback. You obsess about that and let the rest pass.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>