

Transforming our mind

Intro

Welcome back to session three - this session we are going to discover some tools to help us with some of our more difficult thoughts!

Scripture

Romans 12:2

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Question

Following last week's session - how did you get on practicing gratitude? Was it easy, difficult? Did you notice how you felt about situations as you looked for things to be grateful for?

Thoughts

What are thoughts?

Thoughts are our ideas, opinions and beliefs about ourselves, others and the world around us. We have 70,000 to 100,000 thoughts every day.¹

Our thoughts are often automatic, and these automatic thoughts can influence our behaviour², sometimes without us even realising. They can change the perspective we take to the situations, and the meaning we give to everything that happens around us. Our automatic thoughts are often negative, and we generally believe that they are completely true. Often our automatic negative thoughts are subconscious, and we aren't fully aware they are happening, or how they are affecting us.

For example, if we walk into meeting full of people, and lots of people look at us, we might automatically think: 'everyone is judging me' or: 'there must be something wrong with me' or 'I don't belong here, they won't like me' or 'no one here will like me'.

Without being aware of it, we can fall into unhealthy thinking patterns. Take a look at the list below - do you recognise any of these patterns in yourself, or in others?

Discussion: Unhealthy thought patterns

All or nothing thinking: Everything is either good or all bad. There is nothing in-between.

Example: 2 days into dieting and exercises I give in and eat a chocolate. I may as well give up and eat the whole box. My diet has failed.

Overgeneralisation: Any single negative event is an eternal pattern of negativity.

Example: I forgot my friend's birthday. I always forget birthdays, I always get it wrong, I'm a bad friend.

Catastrophising: Expecting the worst case scenario to happen or blowing things out of proportion.

Example: Failing a test. I am going to fail again and get kicked off my course; I will never have a career.

Mind Reading: Believing that you know how other people are thinking or feeling.

Example: A friend walks past and ignores you. They have fallen out with me, I have done something to offend them

Compare and despair: Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others, and getting upset when comparing ourselves negatively against them.

Example: Comparing yourself to a friend. My friend is thinner, prettier and smarter than me. My life is worse compared to their's.

Should and musts: Thinking or saying "I should" or "I shouldn't" or "I must" - puts pressure on ourselves and sets us up for unrealistic expectations.

Example: Being a leader. I should never have said that to that person I am supporting. I must never be angry. I should always be 100% patient and kind to others.

Prediction: Believing we know what's going to happen in the future.

Example: Serving in a new role at church. It is all going to go wrong. I'm going to mess this up and be asked to leave the team.

Mental Filter: When we notice only the negative things around us.

Example: Some one in work doesn't like me. No one likes me, I am unlikable and have no friends.

Which ones do you recognise?

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Looking at our thoughts is part of a psychological approach known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

It's a form of psychological talking therapy where thoughts and behaviours are made more helpful, with the aim of helping a person's mood³. CBT recognises that the way we think and what we do affects the way we feel, and in turn, how we feel affects the way we think, and what we do.

Cognitive restructuring is a part of CBT which helps you to change the negative or distorted thinking that lies behind our mood and helps us to think about situations in more helpful ways.⁴ The more we experience negative thoughts, the worse we are likely to feel. However, if we can come up with alternative thoughts, it can help lift our mood - and even help us to overcome anxiety or depression.

CBT suggests that if you think in a more balanced way, you will feel more balanced in mood.

We can all face difficult circumstances, but different people can have different feelings about the exactly the same circumstances. This is often due to the way we interpret our circumstances - that then gives rise to our feelings.

Discussion

Can you think of a time or an example where two different ways of thinking, have led two different people to feel differently about a situation?

"Between stimulus and response - man has the ability to choose."⁵

Once something has happened to us, we have a choice as to how we react.

CBT can teach us that whilst we might not always be able to change the situations we find ourselves in, we are in charge of our own minds and have a choice about how we think about things.

What does the Bible say about our thoughts?

Colossians 3:2

“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things”

In the previous two sessions we thought about fear, and then gratitude - if we now add in changing our mindset - how might we set our minds on things above? How would having a 'heavenly' mindset change some of the unhealthy thought patterns we looked at earlier? How would the new mindset help us be more grateful and reduce fear?

Philippians 4:8

“Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy- think about such things.”

In his letter to the Philippians Paul asks them to be intentional about what they think about! How might we take a bit more control of the things we think about? How can we intentionally focus on what is good?

Proverbs 4:23

“Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.”

In this Proverb, the writer asks us to pay attention to what is happening on the inside of us. So often our thoughts motivate our behaviour. How might 'guarding' what happens on the inside, change the direction of our life on the outside?

Activity

CBT help us to recognise how our thoughts affect our feelings and behaviour. - Here is how it works. You consider a situation you are in, and you try to identify the thoughts you might have. Then you look at how those thoughts might make you feel, and when you feel like that emotionally, how does that affect your body? And when you think, experience those emotions and physical feelings - how does that affect your behaviour? See the example below.

Event: Walking into church and no one talks to me. Everyone is in groups talking and I am standing on my own.

Thoughts: Everyone can see me on my own. I have no friends in church. No one likes me. I am a loner.

Feelings: Embarrassed, self conscious, ashamed, sad lonely.

Behaviour: I leave the foyer after 2 minutes and sit in my car. I cry.

Physical reactions: hands are shaking, sweaty palms, headache and feel sick.

See if you can complete this model for yourself. Think about a tricky situation you have experienced that you had some difficult thoughts or feelings about - what thoughts were going through your mind, how did they make you feel, and what did you do - how did you behave?

Event:

Thoughts:

Feelings:

Behaviour:

Physical Reactions:

Once you have all had a chance to complete it - you might want to share your example with the group, it's ok if you don't want to though.

Now you have completed the activity, what might happen, if the thoughts you had were different? How might that change the feelings and behaviour?

For example, the person who hasn't got any friends at church, if rather than thinking '*no one likes me - there must be something wrong with me*', they thought '*I have friends in other areas of my life, I know people do like me - perhaps people in church haven't had enough chance to get to know me yet*'

How might that change how they feel and behave?

Discussion – Evidence For or Against?

Sometimes the thoughts we think aren't always true and we can replace our negative thoughts with more balanced thoughts about ourselves with who God says we are. You can try this as part of the homework this week.

Whenever we recognise that we are having a difficult thought that is affecting how we are feeling and behaving, we can ask - is this thought true? What is the evidence for it? As we saw in the activity above, when we challenge our thoughts, we often see that they may not be true, or be the whole picture - there might be a more helpful way to think!

Who we are in God!

God's opinion of us makes all the difference and has the potential to change all of the dynamics that can plague our natural mind with insecurities, rejection and fear. When we are having negative thoughts about ourselves, we can turn to the Bible to find the evidence for or against the thought. When we become a Christian, we gain a new view of ourselves. By the Holy Spirit, we begin the journey of being transformed and it will be a daily process for the rest of our lives.

Next time you are having a difficult thought about yourself see if it lines up with what the Bible says about you.

I am a child of God.

1 John 3:1-2

"See what great love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called Children of God. And that is what we are."

God created me for a purpose

Ephesians 2:10

"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do"

I am chosen

1 Peter 2:9

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"

I am a new creation

2 Corinthians 5:17

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: a The old has gone, the new is here!"

I am made in the image of God

Genesis 1-27

"So God created mankind in his own image"

Discussion and Close

Changing thoughts is a life-long journey. Every day we have to look at what we are thinking about, see if it is really true, and ask for God's help in renewing our mind day by day, so that we will be transformed!

Next Session

Next session we are going to look at self-compassion, which continues us on our journey of changing the way we think about ourselves, and others! But when you have difficult thoughts this week, be kind to yourself!

This week why not try:

- Trying the activity where we looked at events, thoughts, feelings and behaviour a few more times. Perhaps try some different situations, and see if perhaps you might have felt, or behaved differently if you had a different thought.
- If you have some extra time, you might want to complete the thought diary below. It's a helpful tool for us to look at our thoughts and see where we might want to try and make some changes for more truthful and helpful thinking.

Prayer

Lord God,

I thank you that I can give my thoughts to you. I thank you for who you are and who I am in you. I pray that you will help me to control my thoughts and to replace any lies about myself with the truth from your Word.

I pray that I can be still and know that you are God when I'm in challenging situations.

In Jesus name

Amen

Try this at home!

Please see an example of a thought diary below:

Situation	Thought	Evidence for	Evidence Against	New Thought
Walking into church and no one speaks to me	No one likes me, I have no friends, I am a loner	No one came and said hi. This is probably because they didn't want to talk to me. I avoid people I don't like so maybe they avoided me as they don't like me.	When I walked in everyone was already in groups and half way through conversation. Maybe they felt too shy to walk over to me. Maybe they didn't see me. 2 people from that group did text me in the week to say hi.	No one spoke to me when I walked into church but that doesn't mean they don't like me. They might have just been talking about something important or might not have seen me. They might have felt uncomfortable walking over to me.

Situation	Thought	Evidence for	Evidence Against	New Thought

Situation	Thought	Evidence for	Evidence Against	New Thought

References:

1. Get Self Help: Available at <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/thoughts.htm>, accessed 22nd October 2020
2. Greenberger, D. Padesky, C. *Mind Over Mood*. New York: Guildford Press;1995
3. Hart, W. Waller, R. *The Worry Book*. Nottingham: Intervarsity Press 2011
4. Greenberger, D. Padesky, C. *Mind Over Mood*. New York: Guildford Press;1995
5. Covey, S, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. New York: Simon & Schuster 1989

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