

THINKING REALISTICALLY

Step 1: Learn to identify depressive thoughts

Negative thoughts about ourselves and our arthritis condition are often unfair and unrealistic. When we are feeling low or depressed, we have a tendency to distort negative situations, that is, to think of them in a way that may not be an accurate reflection of reality. Some common forms of distorted thinking include the following¹:

Filtering: Focusing only on the bad and failing to see the good. *Realistic thinking takes into account both the positive and negative aspects of a situation.*

Overgeneralization: Assuming that the outcome of one situation will be the same for all situations. For example, if one type of medication didn't work, assuming that no treatment will ever bring relief from your arthritis pain. *Realistic thinking recognizes that the results of one situation do not predict the results of another.*

All or Nothing Thinking: Viewing the world in terms of extreme opposites with nothing in between – i.e. something is perfect or horrible, a treatment will relieve all of your symptoms or none of them, if you are not joyful you are depressed. Small changes are never enough because only a complete change will satisfy you. For example, thinking “Who cares if I walked a block further today? I still can't walk as far as I used to.” *Realistic thinking recognizes that most situations fall in the middle, between extremes, and celebrates small improvements.*

Catastrophizing: Turning a small disappointment into a major disaster. For example, if you have a flare up and need to take a day off work, you assume you are going to have a terrible month and get behind on all of your projects. Instead of reacting to the actual event, one day off, you react to an imagined catastrophe, a whole month of falling behind. *Realistic thinking recognizes the true significance of an event and doesn't overemphasize the prospect of potential negative future outcomes.*

Labeling: Describing yourself or your actions in a harsh way, such as “idiot” or “foolish.” You label yourself and your behavior in ways you wouldn't refer to someone else in the same situation. *Realistic thinking recognizes these kinds of insults are unfair and inaccurate and can be unnecessarily discouraging.*

Mind-reading: Assuming you know what others are thinking about you and that it's always negative. This can lead you to react based on your assumptions rather than on an actual conversation. *Realistic thinking recognizes that you can't guess what another person is thinking and that your assumptions are likely to be inaccurate when you're depressed.*

Fortune-telling: Thinking that you can predict the future and that it's all negative. You are doomed to be unhappy, so why bother trying to make things better? *Realistic thinking recognizes that you can't foresee how things will turn out and that keeping your mind open to possibility can make you more hopeful.*

Shoulds: Assuming you know what the world and your life should be like, but they don't meet your expectations. This can lead to constant disappointment and anger with yourself and others. *Realistic thinking recognizes the limitations of the world and of yourself, seeking opportunities for improvement but also accepting things that can't be changed.*

If you find yourself caught up in negative thoughts, it may be helpful to refer back to this list to identify a more realistic way to look at a situation.

¹ For further information about types of distorted thinking, see *Feeling Good* by David Burns (Avon, 1992).

Step 2: Recognize your depressive thoughts and how they trigger a low mood

Our thoughts about a situation can be so quick and automatic, we may not even be aware of them. Taking time to notice our depressive thoughts is an important step towards shifting them.

When we're feeling low, it may feel like the negativity will never lift. However, our mood can shift throughout the course of a day.

Every time your mood sinks, ask yourself this important question:

"What was going through my mind just then?"

What were you thinking about? What were you reacting to? **Write this down.** For example, perhaps getting on the bus one morning you suddenly felt a deepening of the gloom you've been feeling. What was going through your mind just then? Perhaps you noticed that everyone on the bus was facing you, and you had the thought that they were judging you negatively. **Write it down.**

Keep recording your thoughts until you notice that the same kinds of depressive thinking come up again and again. (CARMHA & BCHMAS, 2009)

Then what? You may start to notice that some of your depressive thoughts are distorted and not a true representation of reality. Perhaps everyone on the bus was facing you because you were at the front, not because they were judging you. Sometimes it might be helpful just to recognize that your mind produces depressive thinking in some situations. Take notice of this and think about where these depressive thoughts come from. You may be able to pay less attention to them or take them less seriously if you are aware of where they come from.

Step 3: Learn to challenge depressive thoughts and replace them with realistic ones

Shifting depressive thoughts involves intentionally re-thinking the situation that was upsetting in the first place. Create a chart like the one below to help you analyze a situation from a realistic thinking perspective. To begin, make a note about the situation, for example, "getting on the bus," "talking to boss," "planning to do housework." Next, record the negative thoughts that seem to be associated with how you feel.

Finally, reflect on the situation and try to identify a more realistic perspective. Keep in mind that depressive thinking may not be aligned with the facts. Sometimes a more realistic perspective may simply involve reminding yourself that you don't have enough information to know for sure what is happening.

If you're having a difficult time coming up with realistic thoughts, asking yourself the following questions may help:

1. Can I find out more about the situation, perhaps by asking someone else?
2. Would most people agree with my perspective? If not, what might be more realistic?
3. How would a friend interpret the situation?
4. If I continue to think this way, what will be the impact?
5. What is another way of interpreting the situation that is more helpful or encouraging?

SITUATION: [Example] Friend cancels lunch date

DEPRESSIVE THOUGHT

- ▼ She doesn't like me now that my arthritis restricts my abilities.
(Mind-reading)
- ▼ No one likes me now that I have arthritis, I'm unlikable.
(Overgeneralization)
- ▼ Life with arthritis is unfair - the world is a cold and rejecting place.
(Catastrophizing)

REALISTIC THOUGHT

- ▼ I don't know why she cancelled; maybe something urgent came up. It's only lunch.
- ▼ Some people do seem to like me, so I must be likable.
- ▼ This lunch doesn't mean much about the world as a whole. I've been accepted before.

Step 4: Practice Realistic Thinking

We often unintentionally repeat our depressive thinking until it becomes automatic. But in the same way that we can develop depressive thinking patterns, so too can we develop realistic thinking patterns with repetition. It may be challenging at first, but the more we practice, the easier it will become.

Particular types of situations may be more likely to trigger depressive thinking than others, such as having an argument with a family member or attending a social gathering where you don't know many people. Think of a few types of situations that usually trigger depressive thoughts for you and write them down.

Once you've identified triggering situations, try to come up with realistic thinking that you can rehearse to put into practice in these moments. A realistic perspective may not arise on its own, you will need to remind yourself to think of things from a different point of view. Imagine what advice you might give to a friend in a similar situation.

"Talk back to the depressive thinking. Don't allow depressive thinking to happen without replying to it. Every time you talk back, you make the depressive thinking weaker and the realistic thinking stronger. But it takes time before realistic thoughts have more influence over you than depressive ones.... Only with time and repetition does realistic thinking – the truth – begin to feel true to you. Eventually you will come to accept realistic thoughts." (CARMHA & BCHMAS, 2009)