



Thought Cards

Young people (and older people too) are sometimes so fused with their thinking that they have a great deal of trouble identifying actual discrete thoughts. They struggle to name and put their thoughts into words.

Others, despite our best efforts to create a space where self-disclosure is ok, may be embarrassed to name their 'worst' thoughts, out of fear of being judged or appearing weird.

By presenting common unhelpful thoughts on cards, the therapist can help the first group recognise frequently occurring thinking, and make it easier for the second group who need only point to specific cards – the very fact that they are printed and in the set helping prove that they are frequently occurring and 'normal'.

As with all ACT activities, always seek the young person's consent before using these cards. Let them know in advance that these are common thoughts people have, and in the case of these cards, most of them are unpleasant.

There is the risk that picking out a number of cards, and seeing the thoughts in print, will make them seem more real and factual in the mind of the young person. Great care must be taken to ensure defusion from these thoughts. Timing must allow defusion activities to follow presentation of the cards. Any responses that come up, of course, allow an opportunity for applying some mindfulness in the session.

Alternatively, it can be a source of comfort to a young person that these thoughts are so common they are among the printed set provided. Since the thought that "I'm the only one who feels this way" appears so common among young people, they can feel reassured that these thoughts are actually normal experiences shared by many.

Instructions

Once consent is obtained, introduce the cards by saying they are a collection of thoughts that people have. You can point out that our minds present us many thoughts during the day, some helpful, others not so helpful, and some particular thoughts might come up a lot. The thoughts presented on these cards are mostly pretty negative, because it is those kinds of thoughts that are probably involved in the young person seeing you today – so most of the cards are those kinds of thoughts, but there are some other more useful ones, too, because our minds aren't all bad, they don't just torture us with unpleasant stories about us.

Say you are curious to see whether the young person recognises any of the thoughts, helpful or unhelpful, as regular ones that come up for them.

- 1) Ask the young person to divide the cards into 3 piles – "I don't have this thought much at all", "I have this thought sometimes", and "I have this thought fairly often."



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- 2) How helpful are any of these? Do any need reframing? (some cards one person may choose as unhelpful, another may pick as helpful – for example, I have had several students pick “I’m weird” as a helpful thought about themselves)
- 3) How much do these thoughts bother the young person – rank them. Which is the most distressing?
- 4) What urges do these lead to? What do you do or not do because of these thoughts?
- 5) What feelings go along with them?
- 6) Which thoughts have the biggest impact on your behaviour?
- 7) Which thoughts influence your relationships with family/friends/teachers/boyfriend or girlfriend?
- 8) Which are linked? That is, which thoughts happen because of other thoughts?
- 9) Frequency? Which come up the most?
- 10) How old are some of these? What is your earliest memory of them appearing?
- 11) What is the context when these thoughts come up? Are there times they are more likely to appear? What sorts of things help them “grow”? At what times are they less troubling? (A crucial point, linking in with the idea of self-as-context)
- 12) What have you tried so far to deal with these thoughts?
- 13) **Key Activity:** (this is a version of an activity by Dr Russ Harris)
 - a. Have the client hold their selected unhelpful cards up like a fan in front of their face, so all they can see are the cards. Suggest to them that this is what it is like when they have fully bought into these thoughts – they cover everything, making it hard to see what is really going on. Ask them how easy is it to relate to you while they are in the way. How easy is it to really see the whole room. How easy would it be to talk with friends, (insert other activities here that you have identified as meaningful to this young person).
 - b. Next have them slowly close and lower the cards, and place the pile on their knee. Ask them what they notice now as they talk to you and look around. Ask them now how easy would it be to do those activities you mentioned before.
 - c. Point out that although they would probably like to just throw that pile of cards away, unfortunately there isn’t really a person on the planet who has truthfully been able to do that – but what we can do is reduce their **IMPACT** and **INFLUENCE** so that they don’t bother you so much.
 - d. Ask them to consider all of these unhelpful thoughts as part of the one story their mind is trying to hook them with. Take a blank card, and fold it in half to make a small ‘book’. Together, come up with a name for the story, along the lines of “The _____ Story”. Write that title on the card, and exchange it for their pile, so now they have the one folded over card on their knee instead of the pile (this is an important visual metaphor to help the young person understand that while they can’t get rid of these thoughts, they need not take up the same amount of space, and have the same impact and influence).



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- e. Have them practise noticing when these thoughts come up, imagining seeing them on cards, then folding them up and slipping them inside the overall story, which can safely sit out of the way on their knee (or in their pocket etc).

ALTERNATIVE – most young people relate better to the idea of music than stories, so you can instead talk about the thoughts as being like song titles (which can lead into a fun defusion activity, singing some of the thoughts to tunes they know), and ask them to come up with the album title. You can talk about their mind being like an MP3 player, where the song selection regularly goes to the unpleasant songs. You can still do what you want to, even with music you don't like in the background. You can even dance to that music. You can thank "DJ Mind" for the playlist.

Additional notes

The initial sorting task represents an important opportunity for demonstrating the act of catching thoughts in flight. Watch the face of the young person carefully, and pick key moments to stop them and ask them to check in with what is going on for them.

The thoughts they have chosen, or the number they have chosen, may trigger further unhelpful thoughts ("Look how many I have chosen, there is really something wrong with me" etc). You might pick an appropriate card, preferably one already in their pile and say something like "Ah, see? We have that thought here already. Is it really new?"

Ask them what does it mean that these thoughts have been printed onto cards – what does that tell them? Some may have no reaction at all, but others may feel greatly relieved to see that these sorts of thoughts are so common.

Some young people will place very few cards in the "frequent" pile. We should not assume that this means they are largely untroubled by unhelpful thoughts (though this may be true) – it may be there is some embarrassment in admitting to some of the thoughts, or they may still be so fused with them that even seeing them written down doesn't help them to 'see' them. In this case, you can still do defusion using unhelpful thoughts from their middle pile.

Additional defusion activities can be applied to the most distressing thoughts. There are many sources of additional activities, or therapists can devise their own.

For reluctant or shy students – this idea is based on the work of Louise Hayes. Ask the young person to choose one thought that bothers them, and pull it out of the pack but not to show you. Tell them you will do the same, picking a thought that sometimes bothers you. After they have chosen, go through and select a card yourself (probably the easiest one to choose, though you are of course free to choose what you want, is "I'm not good enough". If the young person has actually chosen this card, you can say "Hey! I think you took my card!"). Next, you both reveal the cards you have chosen on the count of three. Done with humour, as a shared



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experience, this can be a great ice breaker. It has also allowed exposure to one of the thoughts troubling this young person, and educated them that all of us have these kinds of thoughts some time. It is important to let the young person know that even though we all have these thoughts, the impact and influence of these does not have to be at the level they are currently experiencing it.

Monkey mind metaphor – this is a useful metaphor I like to use, which helps get across the idea of the mind being neither our enemy or our enemy. It reflects the make up of the cards, too, - that our mind will keep presenting various thoughts, one after the other, and it is up to us what use we make of them.

The metaphor: Imagine you are shipwrecked on an island, and there are all these jobs you need to do. You need to build a shelter, get a fire going, even build a raft. Now, there is a monkey who lives on the island that starts following you around. The monkey just wants your attention all the time, but you are really busy trying to do your jobs. So, the monkey just keeps bringing you stuff and giving it to you, to get you to pay attention. Sometimes this stuff is useful – like some vines, or a rock you can use like a hammer. Sometimes this stuff isn't useful, like a banana peel. And sometimes when the monkey really wants your attention it gives you a handful of poo. The point is, there isn't really any point getting angry at the monkey, because it is just doing what monkeys do. And there isn't much point staring at a handful of poo when you have things you want to do. So the best thing to do is just notice what the monkey brings you, and decide whether it is helpful or not. If it is, use it. If it isn't, just gently put it aside.