Session 4

1. Assessment
2. Review homework on perfectionism obstacles
3. CBT model- how thoughts contribute to behavior and feelings
4. Automatic thought exercise
5. Different thoughts cause different reactions to same situation example
6. Brainstorm perfectionistic thoughts
7. Practice thought record
8. Homework: Thought record

Perfectionism in Perspective

Module 6

Challenging my Perfectionistic Thinking

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Introduction

In the last module we looked at behavioural change. In this module we will be looking at challenging and changing the thoughts that keep your perfectionism going. We will be introducing strategies to identify and challenge your perfectionism thinking.

The Thinking-Feeling Connection

Automatic Thoughts

We all have thoughts. In fact, we think so much that we don't tend to pay much attention to our thoughts! Some of our thinking is so habitual that it is automatic and we might not be conscious of our thoughts, just like we don't have to think about how to ride a bike or how to walk down the street. We will be referring to these as **Automatic Thoughts**. Automatic thoughts play a very important part in our emotional well-being. Let's have a closer look at some of your automatic thoughts…

Put one hand on your head and the other hand pointing straight up in the air for one minute. Next, close your eyes and just notice the different thoughts that are running through your head. How did you go? When we asked people to do this exercise, they reported automatic thoughts such as:

> *"my hand is heavy on my head", "I forgot to hang out the laundry", "my arm is getting sore", "is a minute up yet?" "this probably looks really silly".*

Jot down some of the thoughts you noticed during this exercise…

_____

_____

_____

See – you were thinking and didn't even realise it!

There are three kinds of automatic thoughts:

Neutral thoughts, e.g., "I think I will go shopping"
Positive thoughts, e.g., "This is something I can do really well"
Negative thoughts, e.g., "I'm such a failure"

Automatic thoughts often reflect worries and concerns, however they can be about anything at all – anything we've seen, heard or learned. Obviously, though, negative automatic thoughts are the ones that can cause us emotional distress. Perfectionists tend to think negatively about themselves and these thoughts often relate to the unrelenting high standards they set for themselves.

We are not used to slowing our thoughts down however it is really useful to be able to take a step back and take a 'helicopter view' and think about our thinking. In fact, this is an important skill that will help you reduce the negative impact of your perfectionism.

Thoughts influence feelings and behaviours

Not only do we think all of the time, but these thoughts influence the way we feel and how we respond to situations. However, because we are not usually aware of our thoughts we may not realise how much they are influencing our feelings and our behaviours. When we react to a situation, it's not usually the actual situation that makes us feel the way we do, it's the way we *perceive,* or *think about* the situation. Let's look at two examples.

Sally scored 80% on her university assignment (situation). She felt proud and happy and told her parents about her results (consequences).

Sarah, a perfectionist, scored 80% on her university assignment (situation). She felt disappointed and angry at herself and cancelled an outing with friends so she could do some extra study (consequences).

Here we have the exact same situation so why have Sally and Sarah had such different reactions? Well, the explanation lies in their thinking. Sally and Sarah are thinking about the situation in very different ways.

Sally might be thinking something like, "that is a great result", "I worked really hard so it is nice to get rewarded", "my parents will be proud of me".

Sarah, the perfectionist, might be thinking something like, "I'm such an idiot" "I could have done better" "I should have studied harder", "I don't deserve to go out when I get a result like that".

Do you remember the Unhelpful Thinking Styles we introduced in Module 3? (Mental filter, Black and white thinking, 'Shoulding' and 'Musting', Catastrophising , Labelling, Jumping to Conclusions, Magnification and Minimisation.) We can see that Sarah is engaged in a range of unhelpful thinking styles: *mental filter* (ignoring how well she's done), *labelling* ("I'm such an idiot"), '*shoulding*' ("I should have studied harder").

What am I feeling?

It is often difficult to know exactly what we are feeling, and sometimes it can be hard to put it into words. The list below has some words that describe feelings, and this might be a useful starting point in helping you understand the connection between thoughts and feelings.

Unhappy	Annoyed	Angry	Frightened
Depressed	Happy	Tense	Anxious
Uneasy	Panicky	Calm	Scared
Exhilarated	Joyful	Keyed-up	Cheerful
Enraged	Excited	Irritated	Frustrated
Nervous	Sad	Euphoric	Tired
Flat	Uneasy	Discouraged	Mad

This is only a limited list but it should give you an idea about the kind of words we could use to describe our feelings.

Feelings are not Thoughts

When we first try to distinguish thoughts from feelings, it can be easy to confuse them. We might be used to talking about thoughts and feelings as being part of the same experience, but it is more helpful to separate them and remember that feelings are not thoughts and thoughts are not feelings. For example, you might hear someone saying something like, "I feel that I'm going to fail the test" when they're actually *thinking*, "I am going to fail the test" and *feeling* terrified. It stands to reason that if negative thoughts lead to negative feelings, we should be able to do something in order to feel more positive! Let's see what we can do.

ABC analysis

In order to minimise unhelpful thinking, it is useful to become more aware when we have negative thoughts. One way to do this is to do what we call an 'ABC Analysis'. First we need to identify the 'A', the Activating Event – that is, a situation that made you feel unhappy or distressed. Next it is usually easiest to

identify the 'C' – that is, the Consequences (how you felt and what you did). Lastly, we need to identify the 'B' – that is, the Beliefs or thoughts that form the link between the Activating Event and the Consequences.

An example might be: One of Peter's customers, who hadn't had his car serviced for over a year, brought in his car for brake replacement. Here is Peter's ABC analysis:

A Activating Event
Customer brought a car in for a brake replacement

→

B Beliefs
I will never get this done by tomorrow
It is my fault the brakes need replacing
I should have done it right the first time

↙

C Consequences
Felt guilty and stressed
Tightness in my chest
Worked till midnight so the customer could have the car the next morning

Can you think of a situation when you recently felt distressed or unhappy? Try to think of a situation that was related to your unrelenting standards and we will ask you to work out your own ABC connection? Just write a few words to describe the situation (Activating Event), your thoughts (Beliefs) and what you felt and did (Consequences).

A Activating Event

→

B Beliefs

↙

C Consequences

Thought Diaries

Now we have helped you connect your thoughts and feelings, but how do we learn to think in a more helpful or balanced way? One way to address your perfectionistic thinking is to challenge it head on. This is also called 'disputation.' To challenge or dispute your beliefs means that you begin to pull them apart, untangle all the knots, examine the various unhelpful and negative thoughts you might have, and question them. Our attitudes, thoughts, and expectations are often *opinions* we have picked up or learned, rather than facts. Therefore, they can be questioned, and should not be something we just blindly accept if they are giving us problems. But it may be hard to let go of these opinions, as they may have become firmly held beliefs. When you hold a belief very firmly, you begin to accept it as true. It is extremely important to realise that *a belief is not the same as a fact.*

To challenge or dispute your unhelpful thoughts means that you evaluate how accurate they are, examine what evidence you base your thoughts on, and look at any positive aspects you may be ignoring. In this way, you are like a detective or lawyer, trying to get to the facts of how realistic your thoughts and expectations are, and putting things in perspective.

Challenging your thoughts isn't something you should do in your head, as this can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it down. To help you through the process, we suggest using a Thought Diary. This helps you work through the challenging process step by step, on paper, making everything clearer and more helpful for you.

Here are some guidelines on how to complete a Thought Diary followed by an example of a Thought Diary (Polly's). On Page 7 we have provided you with a blank Thought Diary for you to practise on.

Guidelines for Completing a Thought Diary

1. Identify the 'A' or **Activating Event**. This may include an actual event or situation, a thought, a mental picture or a physical trigger.

2. Identify the 'C' or **Consequences**. Ask yourself: "What emotion(s) was I feeling?" There may be a few. Choose the feeling that most closely represents the emotion you actually felt at the time and underline it. Rate the intensity of this emotion between 0 and 100. The higher the number the more intense the emotion. What actions/behaviours did you engage in? What physical sensations did you experience?

3. Identify the 'B' or the **Beliefs**. Ask yourself: "What was I thinking? What was I saying to myself? What was going through my head at the time?" List all the self-statements linking A to C.

4. Identify the HOT thought. Choose the most distressing thought that is most closely connected to your emotion you underlined in Step 2. Don't try to challenge all your unhelpful thoughts and beliefs at once. Take them on *one by one*. Underline your HOT thought and rate how much you believe this thought, between 0 and 100.

5. Identify any unhelpful thinking styles that might be in operation. If you need to refresh your memory, see Page 6 of Module 3.

6. **Detective work**. Referring to the HOT thought, ask yourself: "What is the evidence *for* and *against* my HOT thought?"

7. Challenge your Thoughts through **Disputation**. Ask youself questions such as: "How might someone else (not a perfectionist) view the situation? How else could I view the situation?"

8. Develop balanced and helpful thoughts. After looking at all the evidence for and against your HOT thought, and having considered the disputation questions, replace the HOT thought with helpful, balanced thought(s).

9. Re-rate the intensity of the emotion that you underlined in Step 2, between 0 and 100.

10. Re-rate the strength of your original HOT thought, between 0 and 100.

The goal of working through a Thought Diary is to develop healthy and balanced beliefs that are not rigid and inflexible like the types of thoughts seen in perfectionism. Look through the example on the next page and then work through your own Thought Diary on Page 7. Start by thinking of a recent situation when you felt unhappy or distressed. Think of a situation that was related to your unrelenting high standards (e.g., making a mistake). You will need to practice challenging your thoughts many times before the process becomes easier and more automatic.

My Thought Diary (Polly's example)

A Activating Event

This may include an actual event or situation, a thought, mental picture or physical trigger

I missed practice this afternoon

B Beliefs

1. List all self-statements that link A to C. Ask yourself, "What was I saying to myself?" "What was going through my head at the time?"
2. Underline the most distressing (HOT) thought
3. Rate how much you believe this HOT thought, between 0 and 100

I don't try hard enough.
I am lazy & useless. 90%
I must always push myself to practice more

C Consequences

1. Write down words describing how you feel.
2. Underline the one that is most associated with the activating event.
3. Rate the intensity of this feeling, (0 to 100.

Annoyed
Disgusted
Disappointed 95%

4. Jot down any physical sensations you experienced, or actions carried out.

My chest is tight

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Do you recognise any unhelpful thinking styles you might have been using?

(Black and white thinking, 'shoulding' and 'musting', mental filter, catastrophising, labelling, jumping to conclusions, magnification & minimisation)

Mental filter
Labelling
Musting

D Detective Work and Disputation

Detective Work: Refer to the HOT thought. Ask yourself "what is the factual evidence for and against my HOT thought?"

My HOT thought: *I am lazy & useless.*

FACTUAL EVIDENCE FOR MY HOT THOUGHT	FACTUAL EVIDENCE AGAINST MY HOT THOUGHT
I missed practice *I ate a chocolate yesterday* *I scored fewer goals last week*	*I usually practice more than the others* *I usually work hard* *I'm the highest scorer on the team*

Disputation: Try to answer some of the following questions:

- What other ways are there of viewing the situation?
- If I were not feeling this way, how would I view the situation?
- Realistically, what is the likelihood of that happening?
- What positives about myself or the situation am I ignoring?
- How might someone else (not a perfectionist) view the situation?
- Does it really help me to think this way?
- What are some helpful self-statements?

Missing one practice doesn't mean I'm always lazy
It's reasonable to take a day off occasionally
Missing practice meant I could go to my friend's BBQ
I guess it's not that helpful to beat myself up because I end up feeling worse

E End Result

Balanced Thoughts: After looking at all the evidence for and against your HOT thought, and having considered the disputation questions, replace the HOT thought with helpful, balanced thought/s

It's good to work hard but it's OK to take time off occasionally

Re-rate Emotion: Now, re-rate the emotion you underlined in C, from 0 to 100. *50%*

Re-rate HOT thought: Now re-rate how much you believe the HOT thought, between 0 and 100. *55%*

My Thought Diary

A Activating Event

This may include an actual event or situation, a thought, mental picture or physical trigger

B Beliefs

1. List all self-statements that link A to C. Ask yourself, "What was I saying to myself?" "What was going through my head at the time?"
2. Underline the most distressing (HOT) thought
3. Rate how much you believe this HOT thought, between 0 and 100

C Consequences

1. Write down words describing how you feel.
2. Underline the one that is most associated with the activating event.
3. Rate the intensity of this feeling, (0 to 100.

4. Jot down any physical sensations you experienced, or actions carried out.

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Do you recognise any unhelpful thinking styles you might have been using?

(Black and white thinking, 'shoulding' and 'musting', mental filter, catastrophising, labelling, jumping to conclusions, magnification & minimisation)

D Detective Work and Disputation

Detective Work: Refer to the HOT thought. Ask yourself "what is the factual evidence for and against my HOT thought?"

My HOT thought:	
FACTUAL EVIDENCE FOR MY HOT THOUGHT	**FACTUAL EVIDENCE AGAINST MY HOT THOUGHT**

Disputation: Try to answer some of the following questions:

• What other ways are there of viewing the situation? • If I were not feeling this way, how would I view the situation? • Realistically, what is the likelihood of that happening? • What positives about myself or the situation am I ignoring?	• How might someone else (not a perfectionist) view the situation? • Does it really help me to think this way? • What are some helpful self-statements?

E End Result

Balanced Thoughts: After looking at all the evidence for and against your HOT thought, and having considered the disputation questions, replace the HOT thought with helpful, balanced thought/s

Re-rate Emotion: Now, re-rate the emotion you underlined in C, from 0 to 100.

Re-rate HOT thought: Now re-rate how much you believe the HOT thought, between 0 and 100.

Module Summary

- We all have Automatic Thoughts, which can be positive, neutral or negative.
- Thoughts influence feelings and behaviour.
- In order to minimise unhelpful thinking, it is helpful to identify when we have negative Automatic Thoughts
- We can challenge our specific thoughts using Thought Diaries

What I Have Learned in this Module

Think about what you have learned in this module and any useful bits of information, tips or strategies that you want to remember. Write them down below so you can refer to them later.

Think about how you might use the information you have just learned. Write down some ways in which you could make use of this information.

Coming Up...

In Module 7 (Adjusting rules and assumptions) we will be taking a look at the underlying rules and assumptions that guide perfectionsim

About this Module

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in this module have been developed from evidence-based psychological treatment, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for perfectionism is based on the approach that perfectionism is the result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

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perfectionistic thinking

Perfectionists tend to determine their self worth based on their ability to achieve unrealistically high standards. As a consequence, they may focus on information in their environment that they interpret as evidence that they are not achieving, and criticise themselves harshly when they fail to meet their standards. Such patterns of thinking serve to maintain the importance of attaining extremely high standards.

Biased Information Processing

The way we make sense of what goes on around us plays a big part in maintaining perfectionism. Since there is so much happening in our environment at any one time, our brains choose what we pay attention to and how we make sense of things. We tend to **pay attention** to and **interpret** things according to what we expect.

Since achieving extremely high standards provides the basis for a perfectionist's self worth, they tend to pay careful **attention** to any evidence that they take to mean that they are not achieving. For example, if a perfectionist believes "I must never make mistakes", they will probably quickly pick up errors in their work that other people may not notice.

Perfectionists also have a tendency to **interpret** information in a way that demonstrates that they are not achieving. They often have an extreme view of what success and failure is, with no middle ground. For example, they may say "missing out on an A for this assignment means that I might as well have failed".

Self Criticism & Unhelpful Thinking

Perfectionists tend to be extremely self-critical, especially if they are unable to meet their high standards. They might say to themselves: "I am such an idiot" or "I should have done better". This self-criticism can cause people to feel a range of negative emotions including anger, anxiety, depression and guilt.

Often these negative thoughts reflect an **unhelpful style of thinking** such as:

- ◊ Black & white thinking: seeing only extremes - no shades of gray;
- ◊ Shoulding & Musting: putting unreasonable demands on self and others;
- ◊ Catastrophising: blowing things out of proportion;
- ◊ Jumping to conclusions: assuming that we know what others are thinking, or can predict the future.

How Biased Information Processing and Unhelpful Thinking maintain Perfectionism

When people repeatedly focus on information in their environment that is consistent with their beliefs and ignore information that does not fit with their beliefs, it can appear as if their beliefs are well supported. Likewise a person may perceive that there is a lot of support for their beliefs if they repeatedly interpret information in a way that is consistent with their beliefs.

When perfectionists pay attention only to evidence that they are not achieving, or interpret neutral information as showing that they are not achieving, they tend to feel bad about themselves. For the perfectionist, this then underlines the importance of striving to achieve, thereby keeping their perfectionism going.

Perfectionists' repeated criticism of themselves not only causes them to feel uncomfortable emotions, it also emphasizes the importance of achieving their unrealistically high standards. The negative thinking styles that they rely on cause them to place unreasonable pressures on themselves, see only the extremes and not accurately perceive situations. Such negative thinking styles underlie perfectionists' unreasonable standards and harsh self criticism.

Reducing Unhelpful Thinking*

One way to check out the accuracy of perfectionistic thoughts and find more helpful and balanced ways of thinking is to use a thought diary.

Thought Diaries

Thought diaries are designed to help you become aware of your negative thoughts and notice how these thoughts affect how you feel and behave. Thought diaries can also help you investigate the accuracy and helpfulness of your negative thoughts and develop new more balanced thoughts.

*For detailed information regarding the use of these techniques see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 6.

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