

Automatic Thoughts

So far, you've learned that our emotions are not caused by what happens to us, but how we think about what happens to us. These thoughts are called *automatic thoughts*. Automatic thoughts are the unintentional thoughts that occur in various situations throughout life. These situations may be external, like the breakup of a romantic relationship or the loss of a job, or they may be internal, like when ruminating on past mistakes or embarrassments. At first, it may be difficult to identify your negative automatic thoughts—these thoughts happen so quickly you may not even realize you've had them. With practice, however, you can increase awareness of your automatic thoughts, opening up opportunities to challenge and replace negative thinking in your life.

Let's test your current ability to identify automatic thoughts. Below, you will find two hypothetical situations. After reading each situation, write down the automatic thoughts you might have in each situation. Remember, emotions provide clues to negative automatic thoughts, so in addition to writing down your automatic thoughts, also write down the feelings you might experience in the situation. When you're finished, examine your level of awareness during this exercise. Did you actually identify thoughts where you were supposed to identify thoughts and feelings where you were supposed to identify feelings? How well do the thoughts and feelings you identified match up with each other? Is it likely that the thoughts you identified would produce the feelings you listed?

It's important to keep in mind that our feelings are often reasonable given the situations we face. For example, after experiencing a significant loss it would make sense to feel sadness, anger, or even fear. Changing your feelings from sadness to gladness in this type of situation may not be realistic. However, if your feelings are so intense they impair your ability to go to work, take care of your hygiene, or keep up with your chores, finding alternative ways to focus your thoughts may be helpful in terms of decreasing the intensity of your feelings and their impact on your functioning. *Intensity* refers to the strength or level of distress caused by your emotions. *Functioning* refers to your ability to perform in social, occupational, or school settings. Now, let's practice!

PRACTICE: Identifying Automatic Thoughts

Read the hypothetical situations below. Imagine yourself in each situation and write down your automatic thoughts. Then, write down the feelings you would have in each situation and rate the intensity at which you would experience each feeling from 0 to 100% using the following scale:

0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
Less Intense			More Intense	

Example: You receive an unexpected bill in the mail.

Thought(s): If it's not one thing, it's another. I'll never get ahead.

Emotion(s): Frustrated (70%); Hopeless (60%)

Situation 1: A friend invites you to a party where it's likely you will not know any of the other guests.

Thought(s): _____

Emotion(s): _____

Situation 2: While driving to work, you realize you've forgotten an important file and going back home to get the file will make you 10 minutes late for the morning staff meeting.

Thought(s): _____

Emotion(s): _____

The next exercise provides an opportunity for you to explore the negative automatic thoughts that occur in your own life. Before moving on, review your answers to the hypothetical situations above, checking to make sure your answers to the following questions are “Yes.”

- Did you identify thoughts where you were supposed to identify thoughts and feelings where you were supposed to identify feelings?
- How well do the thoughts and feelings you identified match up with each other?
- Is it likely that the thoughts you identified would produce the feelings you listed?

Hopefully, you’re starting to get the hang of identifying automatic thoughts. Next, you will have the opportunity to identify the negative automatic thoughts that occur in situations in your own life. Below you will find a beginner’s thought record. *Thought records* are a specific type of journaling activity that helps you to identify negative automatic thoughts and their corresponding emotional, behavioral, or physiological reactions. Typically, thought records are in chart format, with sections to record situations, feelings, and thoughts that occur in response to those situations. Most thought records also include space to write a new, more positive thought in response to the situation. This process helps you to increase your insight into the automatic thoughts contributing to your current difficulties, and to be more active in challenging and replacing these thoughts.

Think about a recent situation in which you experienced a particularly strong emotion. Remember from earlier in this worksheet that situations may be external, such as an argument with a spouse, or internal, such as the memory of a past embarrassment. Using the chart below, describe this situation in the column labeled “Situations.” Next, write down the automatic thoughts you had during the situation in the column labeled “Automatic Thoughts.” Finally, write down the feelings you had during the situation and rate the intensity at which you think you would experience each feeling from 0 to 100% in the Column labeled “Emotions.” Keep in mind that you may have several initial automatic thoughts and feelings in each situation you explore. This is ok. Just be sure to double-check your work to make sure that you don’t confuse thoughts and feelings, and that the thoughts and feelings you identified match up with each other. Repeat this process whenever you experience any kind of distressing emotion.

Bonus: What some individuals describe as feelings are actually statements of certain thoughts or beliefs. For example, the statement, “I feel like this is never going to work,” is actually a belief rather than a feeling. Conversely, some individuals describe feelings when trying to identify thoughts. At other times, individuals skip over both their automatic thoughts and feelings, and jump right into problem solving. Making sure you avoid these errors when identifying negative automatic thoughts now can increase your effectiveness later on when developing alternative ways of thinking to manage your emotions and achieve your goals.

Getting Started With Automatic Thoughts

Use the thought record below to get started with keeping track of the negative automatic thoughts and distressing emotions you experience in daily situations.

Situation	Automatic Thoughts	Emotions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What were you doing when you experienced the emotion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What was going through your mind during the situation? Was it words? An image? A memory?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What emotions did you feel during the situation?• How would you rate the intensity of each emotion from 0-100%?