WORKPLACE
WELLBEING

Noticing our thoughts

How thoughts affect our wellbeing

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Welcome

The Workplace Wellbeing offer is a free, confidential package of support inclusive to all UHBW colleagues, whenever helpful.

Full details can be found on our website. Access using this link or by scanning the QR code.

This guide and other topics in the series are intended to provide general information only with signposts to expert sources of support. If you have any questions or suggestions, please email the Workplace Wellbeing team via wellbeing@uhbw.nhs.uk

Contents

What do we mean by 'thoughts'?

The thoughts that we have every day play a huge role in how we feel and our overall wellbeing.

You may have picked up this guide because you are just curious, or perhaps you have noticed that your thoughts are having a negative effect on your wellbeing. We are going to explore what we mean by 'thoughts', how they affect how we feel, and have a look at some useful techniques to help support our wellbeing.

When we use the word 'thoughts', we mean all the stuff going on in our minds. You will be having thoughts right now as you read this. For some of us our thoughts sound almost like an internal voice chatting away to us. For others, thoughts might appear more visual, like watching a scene play out in a film.

Astonishingly it is estimated that each of us may have as many as 70,000 thoughts every day! Our minds are constantly generating thoughts, meaning we are thinking all of the time.

Some of us are quite aware of the thoughts we have, particularly those of us who worry a lot. Others may not really notice their thoughts or really focus on them in the same way.

Thoughts can lead us to feel happy or content, such as the good feeling we get when we remember a great holiday; or the excitement we feel when we think about seeing a friend soon.

Other thoughts can sometimes be the cause of us feeling sad, lonely, angry, and ultimately struggling with our wellbeing. These are the focus of this guide.

How our thoughts affect how we feel

Evidence suggests that it is not what actually *happens* to us in our lives that dictate how we feel (our wellbeing and mood), but instead that it is the way we **think** about what happens to us.

This can be a little confusing so let's look at an example.

Della and James both wake up one Saturday morning to find a text from their friend Jakob saying that he has to cancel having them over for lunch today.

Without any say in the matter, James has an immediate thought "That is such a disappointment! It's late notice; what am I meant to do with the day now? This always happens!" He can feel his mood starting to worsen, and feels angry and low.

Della, again without any say in the matter, has the thought "That's a shame, but now that I don't have any plans I can just relax and start reading that new book I bought last week." Della feels a little disappointment but mostly just feels excited about reading her book.

Note that the situation (i.e. what has happened: reading Jakob's text cancelling lunch plans) is **exactly** the same event for both James and Della. What is different is how they have both **thought** about it.

And as we see, the different thoughts lead to different moods, where James is now struggling whilst Della feels fine.

You can probably think of examples of this...where people have interpreted an event in different ways. Perhaps at work some bad news has been delivered in a team meeting, and some colleagues seem much more concerned than others. This is because we think differently to one another.

Let's consider another scenario. If we wake up with thoughts in our head like "my shift today is going to be awful", then that **thought** can actually make us feel nervous or low in mood, and as a result we may just want to stay in bed to avoid going to work.

There will have been many times in all of our lives where we have dreaded an event and not wanted to go. What has actually happened is that we have had negative thoughts about what that event will be like for us, and that has changed our mood so that we feel nervous about going.

As already seen, **we all have thoughts, all the time**. What is amazing about our thoughts is that they can affect us so powerfully, and yet sometimes we aren't even aware that we are having them. So why does this matter? Well, if we are stressed, anxious or feel low a lot of the time, then learning to notice the thoughts we are having can be a really helpful technique.

Automatic thoughts
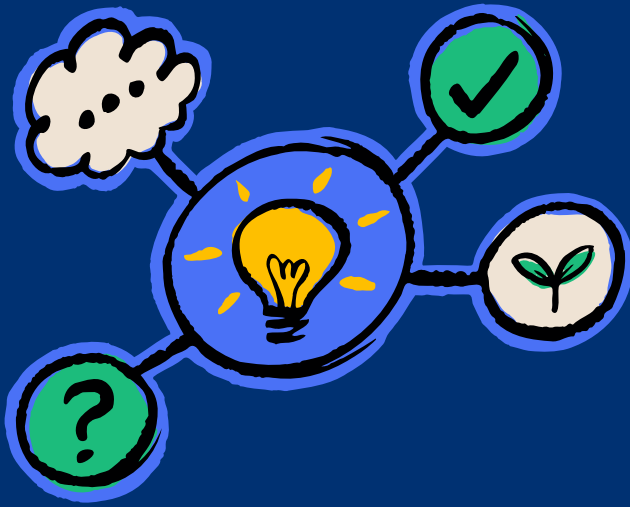
It is important to know that many thoughts have very little impact on how we feel.

For example, whilst you are reading this guide it might suddenly pop into your mind that you would really like a pizza tonight. Then before you know it, the thought disappears from your awareness having not changed how you feel at all.

Clearly a thought like this is unlikely to cause you any distress, unless you are seriously hungry! But notice that we didn't choose to have the thought; it just 'arrived' and then disappeared. This is why people often refer to having **automatic thoughts**...meaning we don't choose to have them.

This is not true for all thoughts, as we can certainly choose to think some. For example, if asked to think about your favourite music...you can choose to focus your thoughts on that in order to consider your favourite music.

However it might be that a thought pops into your head like "*I shouldn't have made that comment in the meeting earlier, I'm sure everyone thought I was stupid.*" This thought is much more likely to negatively affect how we feel; and will likely lead to further thoughts, perhaps remembering other times in our lives that we felt embarrassed.

In this way it can feel that our thoughts can spiral out of our control and cause us to feel low, anxious, or other negative feelings. But, whilst **we cannot control and prevent our minds from having automatic negative thoughts, we can notice and question them, which can change how they affect us**.

The first skill we need to learn is how to **notice** our thoughts; i.e. to notice when we are having certain thoughts and what they actually are. This might feel quite a big task, so something that can be helpful is to start looking out for habits or 'patterns' in our thinking.

A note on working on our thoughts

It can be really helpful to spend time working on noticing your thoughts, but it is important to acknowledge that it can be quite tricky work which can be helped by support from a therapist.

This guide will offer a simple technique which you can do by yourself and may find helpful to start looking at your thoughts in a different way; but if you feel more help would be useful, find out more about the free confidential support inclusive to all UHBW employees using this link.

Unhelpful thinking patterns

As we go through life, we unknowingly form patterns of thinking in certain ways. As mentioned previously, we may have as many as 70,000 thoughts every day, so our brains understandably start to develop short cuts in order to process all the information around us.

A good example of this is crossing a road. This situation could be dangerous if we didn't wait for a green signal to cross, but very few of us will experience fear as we have learnt what to do in this situation through experiencing it many times. So it feels like we don't need to give it much mental focus as we know what normally happens in this situation.

But in different situations our brains can take other 'short cuts' which are **not** helpful. For example, we may have had several experiences in life where we were blamed for something going wrong.

Over time, our brain can start to jump to the conclusion that whatever has happened, it is our fault, even when this isn't true and is actually very unhelpful to our wellbeing. Many people will have a habit in their thinking called 'personalising', where there thoughts will suggest that they are the cause of something.

Let's look at a quick scenario. You go into a shop and buy some milk. When you go to pay, the man at the till doesn't smile and doesn't say hello, he just takes the

money quietly.

Now if your brain has a habit of personalising, you may have an automatic negative thought such as *"What did **I** do wrong?"*, where you are telling yourself the man didn't like something about you. In reality, he may have been tired, distracted, or quiet for any number of different reasons

Just because we thought it, doesn't make it true.

It is an important learning point to realise that your thoughts are not always truHe, and sometimes we need to really notice this to prevent ourselves from behaving unkindly to ourselves or others.

Starting to notice patterns such as this can be a helpful step in stopping us getting carried down a dark tunnel with our thoughts. It's like learning to put the brakes on so we can get out of the car when our mood is rolling downhill.

See below some common patterns people can have in their thinking. As you read them, think about whether you have any of these patterns in your thinking.

Pattern	What is it	Example
Predicting the future	Assuming we know what will happen.	*"I'm going to be exhausted after this shift."*
Mind reading	Assuming we know what others are thinking.	*"My colleagues on this ward don't like me."*
Personalising	Assuming something is because of us/our fault.	*"I wasn't asked to transport the Patient because I'm not good enough."*
Anticipating the worst	Assuming something bad will happen.	*"I will make an idiot of myself in the meeting."*
Shoulds and musts	Telling ourselves that we have to be a certain way.	*"I should have remembered the name of the Patient's mother."*
Worrying	Constantly thinking about the unknown.	*"What if my friend has a car accident?"*

Technique: Noticing our thoughts

The technique introduced on the next few pages is not going to teach you to change your thoughts. Whilst challenging and changing thoughts can be a successful way of improving wellbeing, it is best approached with the support of a therapist.

What the technique in this guide will focus on, is the crucial skill of noticing the thoughts you are having, and learning to recognise patterns in your thinking.

If you are not sure, don't worry, the technique we are going to look at can help us to learn what patterns we might have in our thinking.

By using the worksheet you will be practicing a skill which can help change how you **react** to the thoughts that automatically pop into your head.

It won't happen instantly, as habits in our thinking may have been there for some time, and it may take time to notice them. But by continuing to practice, you may start to increase your self-awareness which can have positive impacts on how you feel.

Let's look at these steps in more detail now. The technique is broken down into four steps described below.

NB: You may find it useful to print out several copies of the worksheet, or if you would rather you can make your own version on your computer or on the notes app of your phone, so it is always nearby.

1. When

This first column of the worksheet is important because it is your first step in noticing that something has negatively affected your mood.

You won't always be able to (or want to) fill in this sheet the moment something has affected you, but learning to notice that something has happened and to turn your mind to it is a great first step, even if it is hours after the event happened.

2. Noticing what thoughts you are having

For some people a thought will sound like an internal voice; for others it might be that they visualise scenarios playing out. We can all think in different ways, but all that matters is that we start to become aware of the thoughts in our heads.

We don't need to notice every thought (that would be a full time job!) but **if a thought has made us feel negative** in some way then it can be helpful to notice what that thought(s) was. There are usually more than one thought in moments where we feel our mood change, but capture those that you think are important, and write them down in the second column however you feel is right for you.

3. What unhelpful thinking style is it?

Once you have written down the thoughts you noticed having, you may find it possible to start looking to see if you notice any patterns in your thinking. Have a look back at the examples on page 6 as a reminder of the sorts of patterns people can have.

Again, do not worry if you are not sure. This might become more clear the more you use the first two columns over time. If you do manage to identify a theme or pattern in your thoughts, well done! That is not something to feel bad about, we all have them! It just means now you are more likely to notice when your brain is slipping into those habits of thinking. And by noticing, we are able to question its accuracy.

This ability to notice and question is like taking a domino out of a line of dominoes that are falling down. It can help stop your mind from assuming the automatic negative thoughts are true.

4. How did it affect me?

This final column is an opportunity to notice how the thoughts affected your mood. Whilst it can feel a bit vulnerable and we can sometimes prefer to ignore or avoid accepting how we feel; it is useful to take a moment to actually notice the impact of your thoughts. This can help motivate us to want to continue practising and increasing our awareness of the patterns in our thinking.

This worksheet might be something you use once a week, or even every day. But you won't need it forever! It is all about developing the new skill of noticing your automatic negative thoughts and the patterns in your thinking.

Noticing our thoughts Worksheet

When	What was my thought? E.g. "He thinks I am incompetent."	What unhelpful thinking style is it? E.g. mind-reading.	How did it affect me? E.g. "it made me feel like going home."

Useful tips

When to use the worksheet?

It can take time for us to form new healthier habits in our thinking, and to remember to keep noticing our thoughts. Use this sheet (or make your own version of it on paper or on a mobile phone for ease) for as long as you find it helpful.

How often to use it?

It is most helpful to use the worksheet when you notice a decline in your mood; whether it is stress, anger, feeling anxious or low. You may not feel able to use it straight away when feeling a negative emotion; but as soon as you can, have a go at using it to help notice the role that your thoughts have played in how you are feeling.

If this technique does not work for you, or does not appeal, there are other ways you can explore your thoughts and their role on your wellbeing.

Access the Workplace Wellbeing site here to find out other apps, websites and guides that can help you continue this work.