

Cooling down hot thoughts.

Relevant to: Depression:  Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control: 

Sometimes things happen to cause us distress, and very often the distress we feel isn't entirely because of what's happening, it's because of the way we're thinking about what's happening. That is, we have 'hot thoughts' that distress us; so it's worth knowing how to cool those thoughts down. Trying to suppress distressing thoughts doesn't usually work – we need to 'cool them down'. So how do we do it?

Step One: Notice that you're in distress!

Not as obvious as it sounds, some people get so used to suppressing their distressing thoughts they barely think of themselves as being in distress. They simply exist in a half-power state; not happy but not admitting they're unhappy. So, step one is to notice if you're in distress. Rate how distressed you are out of 100 if you like.

Step Two: What thoughts are bothering you?

Another tricky step until you're used to it, because it's sometimes difficult to identify just what thoughts lie behind things. So the best way is to write down a few possibilities – see the example cases – then decide which one is the most bothersome.



Case example One:

1. Jo rated the distress as 80 out of 100, describing it as agitated and depressed.

2. Jo identified the thoughts as "I've wasted my life" ... "Everything I do is useless" ... "I used to be so hopeful about things" and similar. Jo decided the really 'hot' thought was "I've wasted my life".

3. Jo found evidence for the hot thought as follows: "Job has poor career prospects" (shop manager); "Other people I know have done better than me"; "I'm not married nor in a relationship".

Evidence against was: "I have a First Class honours degree in physics"; "At 25 years old it's too early to say life has been wasted"; "I have had two rewarding relationships and have some good friends and family"; "I have a fairly good job and am supporting myself".

4. Jo modified the hot thought as follows. "Although some other people have done better than me at this stage, and maybe I could have done better too, I have achieved a fair amount in my life so far."

5. Jo re-rated the distress as 20 out of 100.

Step Three: Look at the evidence for, and the evidence against, your thought.

Do it that way round. Be logical about it; accept only evidence that would stand up in court ... what you think or what you believe might be the case wouldn't stand up in court, so stick to real facts. See case examples.

Step Four: Review and re-write your bothersome thought from Step Two.

You'll probably find that it was too 'extreme', and you'll need to tone it down a bit. And guess what? When you tone it down a bit, your distress tones down a bit too. Write down your new, toned down version.

Step Five: Re-rate your distress.

Remember you rated your distress out of 100 in Step One? Try re-rating it now. The chances are it will be a lot lower. Probably not 0, because there's maybe something in what you were thinking, but maybe not nearly so much as you thought.

Case example Two:

1. Sam rated the distress as "at least 90" out of 100.
2. Sam identified the thoughts as "We're going to be out on the street"; "Everything I've worked for, for 30 years, is gone" (Sam is a self-employed shop-keeper); "I can't even think straight any more". Sam decided the really hot thought was "We're going to be out on the street."
3. Evidence for the hot thought was: "There's no money in the current account"; "I've had fewer customers in than last month"; "I'm really really worried". (This last was struck from the record because it wouldn't hold up as evidence in court. The first two are real evidence though.) Evidence against was: "We own our house"; "The shop is making a profit"; "Customers are still coming in".
4. Sam modified the hot thought as follows. "Although the shop isn't quite as successful as it was, it is still quite profitable. I had however better cut down on my spending somewhat."
5. Sam re-rated distress at 35.

In-session discussion.

Looking at example case 1 and 2, both Jo and Sam got a lot of benefit from cooling down their hot thoughts. How do you think they can hang on to that benefit, without just drifting back to their previous ways of thinking? (See below.)

Out of Session Project.

Try spotting when you're in distress, getting out paper and pen, identifying your hot thought, and cooling it down. You'll probably find it quite tricky for the first few times, but persist – it's a great thing to be able to do.

Note: it is an interesting an important project, and the group leader will ask how people got on with it next time. So remember to make a note if you want to say how it was for you.

Mythbuster:

Myth1: If you have a big worry it is best to keep pondering it.

Myth2: If you have a big worry it is best to put it to the back of your mind.

Both are myths: the fact is that if you have a big worry, it's best to defuse it, as on this sheet. If you can't defuse it, and you really are 'heading for the street' (see case example 2) then you should use Problem Solving to resolve the problem as best as it can be.

One answer to the in-session discussion is as follows. They could either (a) write down the new, modified thought on a piece of paper or card they carry with them and read it occasionally, or (b) write it on a computer file they look at regularly, or (c) find a picture that embodies the modified thought, and use it as a screen saver on their phone or computer.