

Chapter 6

What you think determines what you feel.

Your mind controls your mood. In fact, it is safe to say that you always have some thought (mind) before you feel something emotionally (mood). The thought might be so fast and seemingly “automatic” that you don’t even see it or think you are thinking it but you are. The truth is that *what you think determines what your feel*—it’s a basic law of life. Test it out: try to remember the last time and place you began to feel a strong feeling you didn’t like. Who were you with, what you were doing, what day and time was it? Bring it to mind very specifically. Once you are very clear about all the details of the specific situation you were in when you started feeling that way and can describe what emotion you were feeling (mad, glad, sad, scared, etc.) ask yourself this very important question: “what was going through my mind just before I started feeling ____?” Don’t say “nothing” because that is not true. You are *always* thinking something unless you are dead. And if you were dead, you wouldn’t be reading a book about the laws of life. You are very much alive and always thinking something. So, dig. What image, thought, memory or scene was going through your mind immediately prior to, even milliseconds before, feeling that emotion? Whatever the thought/image was, and there may have been more than one, that is what produced an emotional response that we call a “feeling”. If you have an emotion/feeling that lasts longer than several minutes we call that a “mood”. Moods are emotions/feelings that have long lives. Although lots of people think that moods just happen to them (e.g., “it just came over me”) the fact is that you create your moods and your shorter lived emotions or passing feelings by the way you think. What you *think* determines what you *feel*.

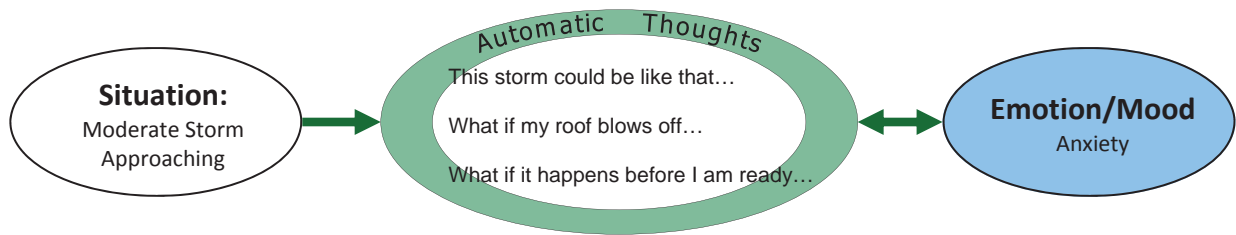
Cognitive Therapy Basics

A psychiatrist named Aaron T. Beck (and colleagues) first articulated this thought-feeling connection in terms of therapy for people who were depressed. He called the therapy “cognitive” or “cognitive-behavioral” because it focuses on how “cognitions” (thoughts) determine mood. You can read more about this in terrific books like Cognitive Therapy of Depression (Beck), Mind Over Mood (Greenberger & Padesky), Feeling Good (Burns), etc. listed in the Appendix to this book. Beck and others showed that people who feel a lot of sadness or anxiety actually think quite a lot of thoughts just before their feelings start. Many of these thoughts are somewhat distorted and, because of these distortions, produce problematic feelings and moods that people don’t like. I say “problematic” because I want to make it clear that feelings and emotions, in general, are natural and important parts of our experience. There is no feeling or emotion that is, in and of itself, “bad”. We might like some feelings more than others but each emotion has an important role in our lives. There are times when anger, sadness, fear, joy, confusion, etc. are all very appropriate and necessary responses to certain situations. The problem arises when any one of these emotions becomes an enduring mood that begins to limit our lives or cause us problems. Such limitations and problems are usually caused when we give the moods we create too much power over us and allow them to take control. Dr. Frankenstein created the monster and then the monster took control. That is what we do when our distorted thoughts create monstrous moods. The 6th law of life, “what you think determines what you feel”, says that we can take back control by changing the way we think. Let me show you an example.

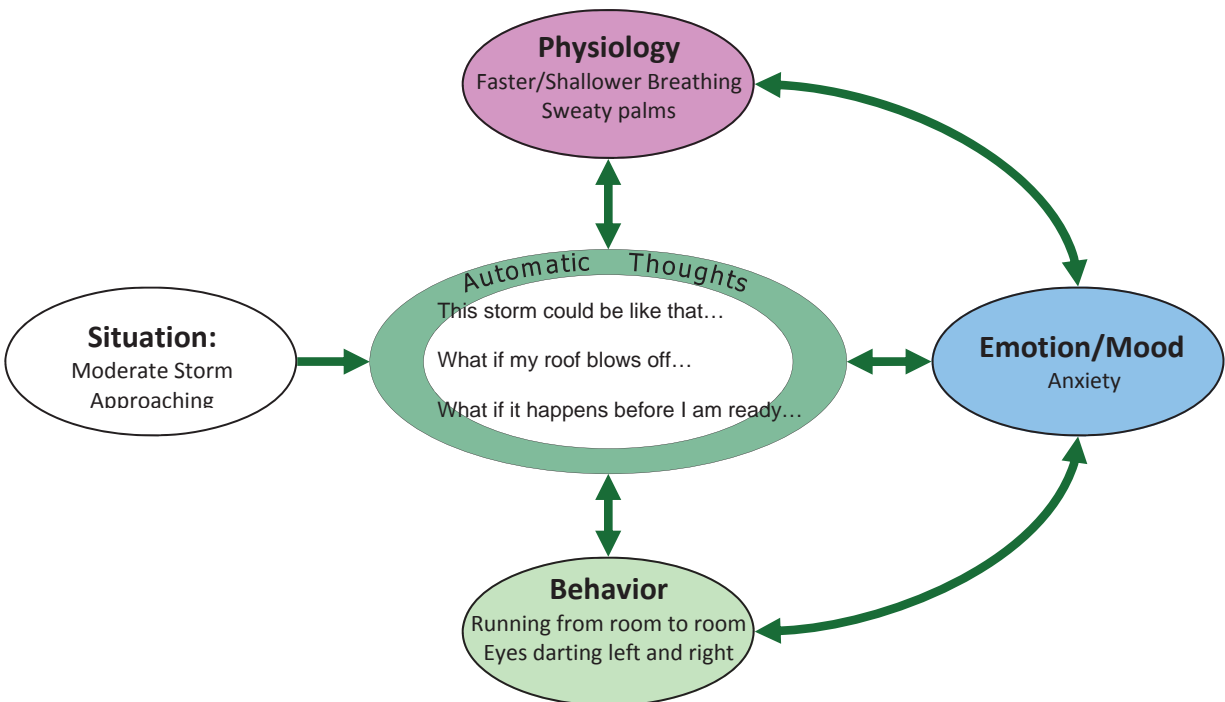
Automatic Thoughts

Imagine a friend of yours, Carl, hears that a moderate storm is coming to the area where he lives at 10:00 tonight. Carl recalls news videos of a serious hurricane or tornado that hit a state near him a couple of years ago. In his mind, he sees all the damage and destruction. He begins to

think, “this storm could be like that—I mean—if it can happen over there it can happen here!” “What if my roof blows off and everything in the house gets flooded or blows away? What if it happens before I am ready, I get badly hurt and can’t call for help, and no one will know about me?” As he thinks these *thoughts* his *feeling* of anxiety increases. If we drew a diagram of Carl’s *thoughts* and *emotion* in this *situation*, it would look like this:



Now, back to what’s going on with Carl. He may notice that his palms are starting to get moist and his breathing becomes faster and shallower. His eyes may start darting this way and that as his *thoughts* raise the stress and anxiety levels he *feels*. He may even begin to have the symptoms of a rush of anxiety called a panic attack. He runs from one room to the next without really getting anything accomplished. He scares his family and even the dog hides under the bed. He has created his own, personal emotional storm by the way he *thought* about the coming atmospheric storm. As he continues to think catastrophically, his thoughts create more anxiety and reinforce the anxious feelings he *already* has. His anxiety continues to fuel his *physiological responses* and, as he notices his body responding in these ways, he *feels* more anxious and thinks stormier *thoughts* (see figure below).



These additional thoughts, bodily responses, and increased anxiety also result in more frantic *behavior* which he interprets as evidence for even more anxiety, more frantic thoughts, and more physiological responses. These three response areas, emotions, behaviors, and physiology strongly interact with and reinforce each other. Look at the figure above. Notice that there are

two-way arrows between each of these three response areas and automatic, distorted thoughts. This means that the cause and effect relationships go both ways. In the example above, shallow breathing and fast heartbeat (physiological responses) resulted from anxious feelings (emotional response) which were created by distorted thinking. As Carl noticed the change in his heart rate and breathing he might think “I am going to have a heart attack!” (another distorted thought) that only produces more anxiety (emotional response), more frantic running around (behavioral response) and an even higher heart rate, more sweating, and breathing problems (physiological responses). The stormy cycle continues until Carl falls into a heap. That is no good and certainly doesn't help Carl get ready for the actual stormy weather to come. Therefore, it is important to work on all three of these response areas to effect a real change. That is why *cognitive* therapy is sometimes also called *cognitive-behavioral* therapy. It is designed to help change both *cognitions* (thoughts) and *behavior*. Often relaxation and breathing techniques are used to help deal with *physiological* arousal and to reduce its negative effects on mood.

What is the result of Carl's emotional typhoon? His anxious *feelings/emotion* now are a longer lasting anxious *mood* and he is stressing his body, mind, and relationships. He is responding to a mental *perception* of a reality that is not real. His *thoughts* about the coming storm are so distorted and unbalanced that he has created a very exaggerated, problematic anxious *mood* that makes it harder for him to respond effectively to the real storm brewing. Distracted and reacting to thoughts that distort the true issues at hand, he winds up endangering himself and others much more as he remains in this exaggerated anxious mood state. So, how does he get out of it? What can he do, specifically, to tame this monster? Sit down, take several deep breaths to relax, and put each of his *distorted thoughts* “on trial”—examine each as if he were in a court of law and are looking for the evidence to prove/disprove the truth of each thought.

His distorted thoughts about the storm created an unrealistic perception (mental image). These thoughts have no basis in fact and there is really no evidence to support them. He asks himself, “do I want to spend my time and energy on things that are not true and are not actually going to happen? No? OK—I'm going to take a good, hard look at everything that went through my mind as I produced this overly anxious state.”

Thought # 1: This storm could be like that—I mean—if it can happen over there it can happen here!

Truth: The weather reporter said this is a medium level storm and the one that hit near me a couple of years ago was a massive, powerful one. This one is tiny by comparison.

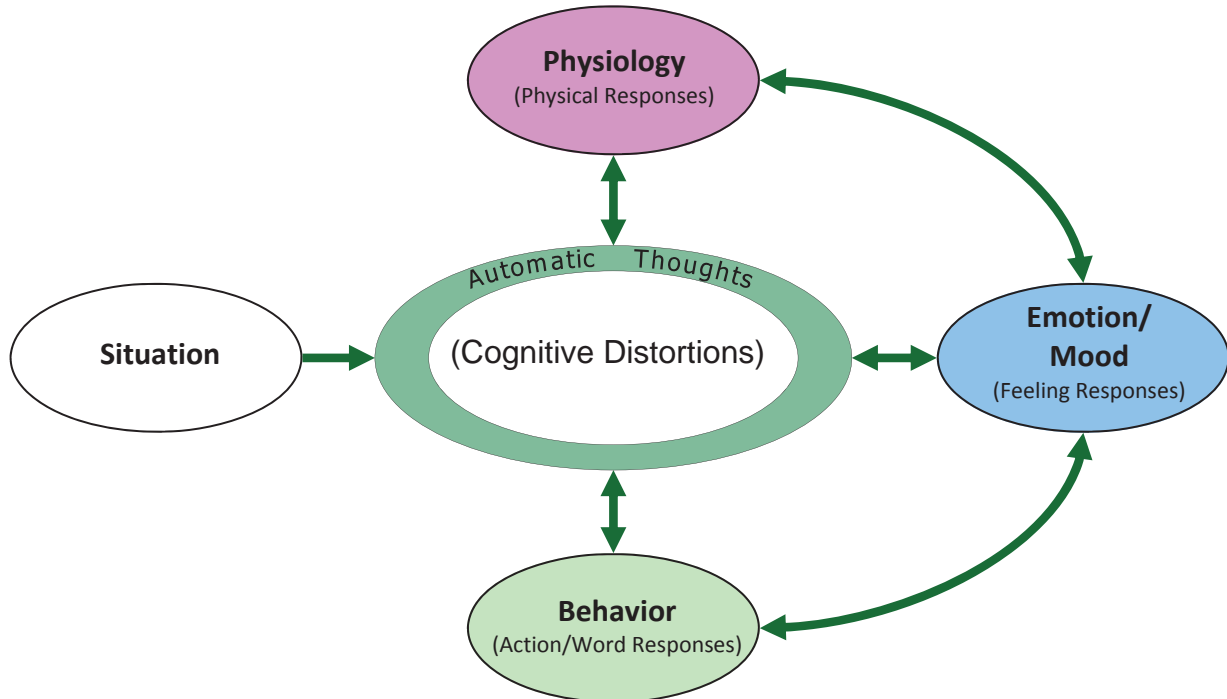
Thought # 2: What if my roof blows off and everything in the house gets flooded or blows away?

Truth: The predictions say that only minor damage is expected and most of that will be to trees.

Thought #3: What if it happens before I am ready, I get badly hurt and can't call for help, and no one will know about me?

Truth: I have a cell phone that with a newly charged battery and I have everyone's number in it. My family is with me and I have already agreed with my neighbors that we will check on each other if things get too rough. People know I am here and others are with me. I am not alone.

Now, if, like Carl, you can imagine having worked yourself up into a high level of anxiety because of your negative, distorted thoughts how would you feel after you tested them and realized the truth about each thought, as above? Read just the “truth” part of each thought again. This is much more realistic, right? The evidence about the storm suggests that people would be wise to prepare but that high levels of anxiety are neither warranted nor helpful. These evidence-based perceptions of reality not only more accurately reflect the truth about the situation of a coming storm but also reduce the disabling effects of exaggerated anxiety making it easier for Carl to do what he needs to do to prepare. Carl’s heart rate slows down, his palms dry some, his breathing returns to normal, and he can now *choose* what **he** would like to do (behavior) to prepare for the storm. His emotions are no longer in control. He is. Can you see how powerful thoughts are in creating what you feel and influencing what you say and do in response? If you remember from the 1st law of life, “you are responsible for your behavior and only your behavior”, you are responsible for everything you *say, do, think, and feel*. This chapter, devoted to the 6th law of life “what you think determines what you feel”, describes how you can take much more control of the *think-feel* aspects under your responsibility. As you exert more control over what you *think* and *feel* you will be in a position to lead yourself better in what you *say* and *do* in response. It is about taking responsibility for your thoughts and feelings and leading yourself better using them. We just saw an example of how distorted automatic thoughts lead to an exaggerated anxious *emotion/mood*, produce *physiological* responses to that anxiety and disable effective *behavior*. We also saw how correcting the distorted thoughts that produced that anxious mood resulted in a more balanced emotion/mood state, more relaxed physiological responses, and better behavioral choices. The same process works with respect to any other emotion/mood including anger, sadness, confusion, etc. Below is a graphic description of how this happens. This model can be applied to any emotional, behavioral, or physical responses to distorted thinking.



We used it with the example above in which the *Situation* was the coming storm. We have already discussed the distorted thoughts and that each contributed to an excessively anxious *Emotional Response*, lead to *Physiological Responses* of sweaty palms, fast and shallow breathing, and

Behavioral Responses that were frantic but not effective. You may think, “oh, Carl is so silly, I would never react like that, so “over-the-top”! Really? You might be surprised to learn, then, that you often may be responding to situations in ways that leave you feeling sadder, angrier, more anxious, and more confused than the situation warranted. You wind up paying the emotional price in moods you don’t enjoy. Carl’s behavior may seem an extreme example to you but exaggerated emotional and mood responses very much like this are actually quite common. If pushed a bit, you might also agree that there is more you can do to improve the way you take charge of your own emotional, physiological, and behavioral responses: to be more response-able. To do this you will first need to examine and correct any thoughts or any parts of your thoughts that are distorted. You can do this by examining the actual evidence available and replacing the distortions in your thoughts/perceptions with a more balanced and accurate reflection of the reality of whatever situational “storm” you are facing.

Types of Cognitive Distortions

So far, we have used a fictitious situation of an impending storm to demonstrate how someone allows his or her specific distorted thoughts about it take control and determine their responses. You can probably already imagine that a person could generate thousands of different distorted automatic thoughts in thousands of different situations. Researchers and writers about cognitive-behavioral therapy have analyzed a huge variety of automatic, distorted thoughts and have described eleven different types of cognitive distortions that cover them all. Take some time to look through these and ask yourself if any of your automatic thoughts tend to be distorted in any of these ways.

All-or-Nothing Thinking:	You view a situation in only two categories instead of on a continuum (“black and white” thinking).
Fortune Telling:	You predict the future negatively without considering other more likely outcomes (jumping to conclusions about events).
Mind Reading:	You believe you know what others are thinking, failing to consider other, more likely possibilities (jumping to conclusions about people).
Discounting the Positives:	You unreasonably tell yourself that positive experiences, accomplishments, or qualities do not count.
Emotional Reasoning:	You think something must be true because you “feel” (actually believe) it so strongly, ignoring or discounting evidence to the contrary.
Labeling:	You put a fixed, global label on yourself or others without considering that the evidence might more reasonably lead to a less disastrous conclusion.
Magnification/Minimization:	When you evaluate yourself, another person, or a situation, you unreasonably magnify the negative and/or minimize the positive.
Mental Filter:	You pay undue attention to one negative detail instead of seeing the whole picture.
Overgeneralization:	You make a sweeping negative conclusion that goes beyond the current situation.
Personalization:	You believe others are behaving negatively because of you, without considering more plausible explanations for their behavior.
Should” statements:	You have a precise, fixed idea of how you and / or others “should” behave and you overestimate how bad it is that these expectations are not met (“must” and “ought” are also included here).

It is very helpful to recognize the type of cognitive distortion a particular automatic thought of yours represents because knowing the type can help you dispute it. For example, if you think, “I should like this new job.” (Should Statement distortion) You can dispute that by saying “Look, fact is, I don’t like it—I am not going to ‘should’ on myself about it or make a rule about my feelings—I just need to figure out a way to either deal with it or get out of it.” For “I just know the storm is going to damage the house,” (Fortune Telling distortion) you can dispute with “Really? How do you know that? What is the evidence for that? Isn’t it more likely that the storm will be as they predicted? So, deal with the storm as it is, not as you ‘fortune tell’ it will be and stop making things worse for yourself.” In addition, knowing the type/s of distortion you tend to fall into will help you quickly identify it and dispute it when you do it again. If you do a lot of Mind Reading and catch yourself doing it again you can say to yourself “there you go mind reading again...what evidence do you have that she thinks that about you?” By recognizing the kinds of distortions your thoughts represent, you will get a leg up on disputing them.

The SEAT Method

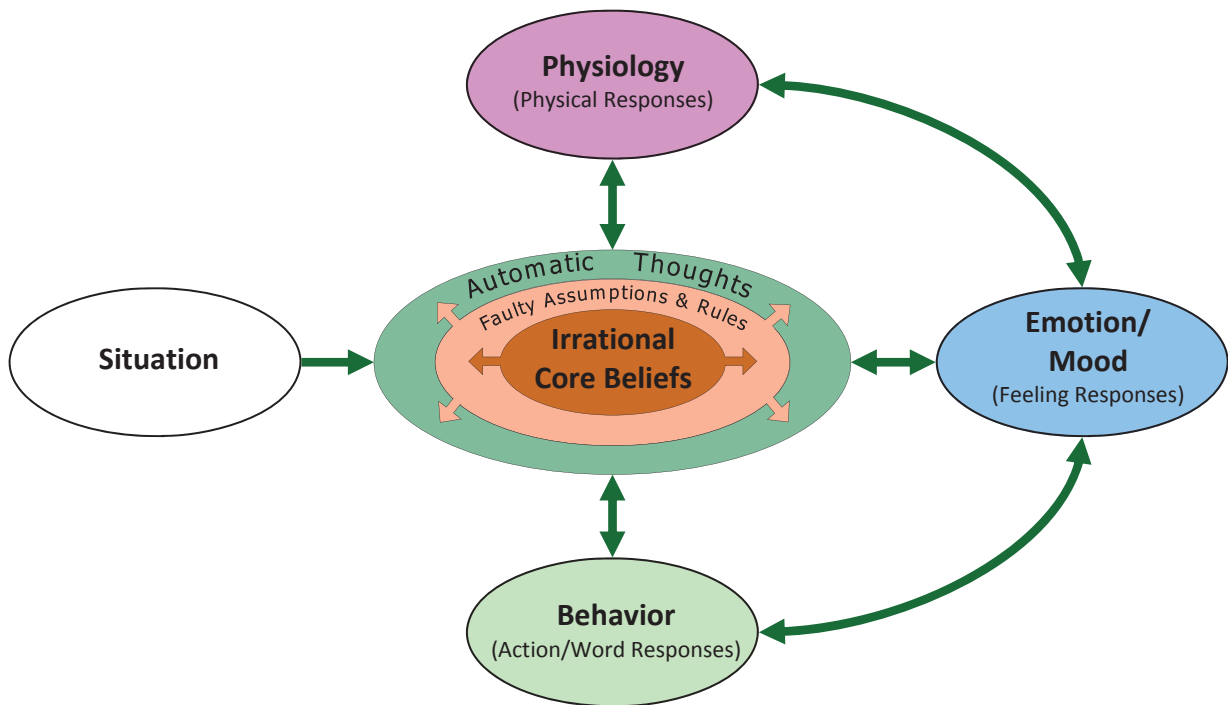
Let me show you how you can put all this together using a very easy little tool that will save you much heartache and emotional pain. Since so many people struggle with so much excessive sadness that can even grow to be described, clinically, as “depression”, I will demonstrate this tool using the same situation (impending storm) but with an emotional response of sadness that endures as depressed mood. As I demonstrate this tool, I will add two more steps. First, I will rate how intense the feeling is on a scale of 0 – 100% where 0% = no presence of the feeling at all and 100% = that feeling at the most intense anyone could ever feel it. This will help us see how examining the evidence and getting a more balanced appraisal of reality makes real, measurable, changes in mood. Second, I will identify the type of distortion each automatic thought represents. This little method is called the *SEAT Method* (Situation, Emotion, Automatic Thought, Truth) and it is an extremely powerful little tool I encourage you to use to manage your thoughts and mood. It is a simplified version of Beck’s *Dysfunctional Thought Record*. Let see how it works in the storm example in terms of sadness/depression.

Situation	Emotion %	Automatic Thought	Truth %
Impending storm to arrive at 10:00 p.m. tonight.	Sadness 85%	There is nothing I can do—my house will be either ruined or lost altogether. (<i>Fortune Telling, All or Nothing Thinking, Magnification</i>)	The reports say only minor damage will occur and we might lose some tree limbs. Also, there IS something I can do. I can prepare the house, get some flashlights, and contact my neighbors.
		I will probably be hurt or homeless. (<i>Fortune Telling, Overgeneralization</i>)	The storm is only a mid-level one and no serious damage is predicted. It is unlikely that anyone will be seriously hurt or die, least of all me. I just need to do what is necessary to prepare.
		I feel so sad and that just shows how things must be bad and will turn out horribly. (<i>Emotional Reasoning, Fortune Telling</i>)	Just because I feel something doesn’t make it true. I am sad because my thinking is so distorted and negative. Things might be challenging in the storm but I am preparing well to meet all the challenges.
			Sadness 15%

You can see a huge decrease in sadness (from 85% to 15%) and much healthier and more balanced thoughts after examining the evidence and arriving at a more truthful appraisal of reality. Which level of sadness (*emotion*) will help this person be more successful in doing what is needed (*behavior*) and managing their stress response (*physiology*) so that the storm can be weathered successfully, 85% or 15%? Clearly, the lower level will. All responses (emotion, behavior, physiology) are more effective when distorted thoughts are corrected and a more balanced view of the situation is accepted.

Faulty Assumptions/Rules and Irrational Core Beliefs

We've seen that there is real power in removing distortions from our automatic thoughts by using something like the *SEAT Method* to help us examine and record the evidence that disproves our distorted thoughts and reinforces the reality of a situation. Working to get our thoughts more realistic is very powerful and yet that may not be enough. After all, where did these distorted thoughts come, in the first place? Is there something underlying them that is producing them and that we might need to work on as well? Yes. Cognitive theorists and researchers have described at least two underlying generators of distorted thoughts: *Faulty Assumptions/Rules* and *Irrational Core Beliefs*. Let's add them to the diagram below which now completes what is called *The Cognitive Model*.

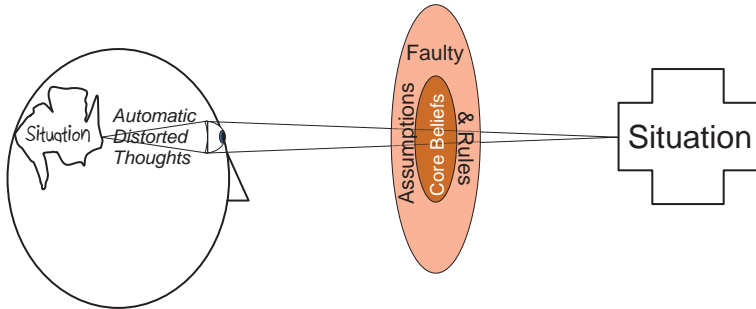


The Cognitive Model

Understanding this model is one of the very first things cognitive therapists help their patients do. It is important because cognitive therapists are attempting to help patients learn all the skills to be their own therapist. Patients cannot learn and use the skills unless they understand how each of their responses works with the others. Look at this now complete model as I describe these new parts. As we deal with any given *Situation*, we bring to it all our experience from our past life. Through our experience in our past, we formed some basic “rules of thumb” we use to navigate

through life. Some of these serve us well but some are *Faulty Assumptions/Rules* about how we *think* things work or how we think they “should” work (recognize the Should Statement distortion already?). We have also formed, from our early years on, a basic view of our self--a *Core Belief* about our self. We constructed this *Core Belief* from what we learned at home and school, how others treated us, and how life seemed to unfold for us. If positive, these *Core Beliefs* can be very helpful and support us in tough times. The *Core Beliefs* that get us in trouble, though, are often unbalanced, limiting, and very negative. A very negative *belief* about who we are leads us, in turn, to make some equally negative *assumptions* about how we will do, how others “should” treat us, and how we expect the future to be for us. As we encounter any given *Situation*, we look at it through the lens of these negative, irrational *Core Beliefs* and *Faulty Assumptions/Rules*. The way

we see the *Situation* and frame it in our minds flows automatically from these beliefs and rules. The *Automatic Thoughts* produced as a result are usually very distorted, as we saw above, and even though we don’t consciously think about our underlying *Faulty Assumptions/Rules* or *Core Beliefs*, they are very active in producing the distorted thoughts and



perceptions of our situation. We’ve already seen how distorted thoughts/perceptions lead to problematic *Emotions*, dysfunctional *Behaviors*, and *Physiological* upsets. Let’s take both the anxious and sad moods we discussed, above, to see how these *Distorted Automatic Thoughts* are rooted in *Faulty Assumptions/Rules* and *Irrational Core Beliefs*.

Anxious

Sad

Distorted Automatic Thoughts

This storm could be like that—I mean—if it can happen over there it can happen here!

There is nothing I can do—my house will be either ruined or lost altogether.

What if my roof blows off and everything in the house gets flooded or blows away?

I will probably be hurt or homeless.

What if it happens before I am ready and I get badly hurt and can’t call for help and no one will know about me?

I feel so sad and that just shows how things must be bad and will turn out horribly.



Faulty Assumptions/Rules

If bad things happen, I am bound to get hurt.

“Things never happen that are good. I always catch shit.



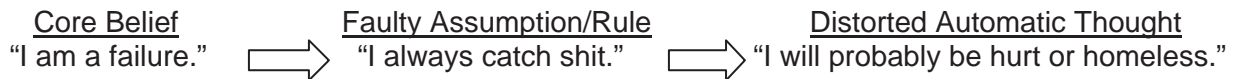
Irrational Core Belief

I am powerless.

I am a failure.

Start with anxious side, at the bottom, and notice the unbalanced *Core Belief* “I am powerless”. Other examples of *Irrational Core Beliefs* are “I am a failure”, “I am unlovable”, “I am helpless”, and “I am bound to be alone.” Any very negative “I am” statement may serve as an irrational or unbalanced *Core Belief* we may have learned early in life. These beliefs tend to be very negative, overarching, and very, very firmly held. Whatever word/s immediately follow the powerful words “I am” creates a statement that is sums up who I am *permanently, universally, and specifically*. For example, someone whose core belief is “I am powerless” believes that this will never change and that they will always be powerless, that they are powerless everywhere they go, and that while others have power, they, specifically, do not and never will, anywhere. Can you see how such a belief could undercut an entire life? It is an extremely powerful, profoundly entrenched, and unbalanced belief that sets someone up to see all sorts of negative patterns and create negative assumptions and faulty rules about their life. In ANY situation a person who deeply believes, “I am powerless” is probably going to think very distorted thoughts that will produce unpleasant anxious *moods, bodily sensations, and behaviors*. Now look above at the “I am powerless” *Core Belief* and see how the *Faulty Assumption/Rule* “if bad things happen, I am bound to get hurt” springs naturally out of that negative *Core Belief*. *Faulty Assumptions/Rules* are usually framed as negatives about our self, our world, or our future. Other examples of *Faulty Assumptions/Rules* are “nothing will ever work out right for me”, “people should always treat me well”, “I will never win”, and “I expect to fail.” The three *Distorted Automatic Thoughts* at the top are rooted in the *Faulty Assumption/Rule* and, in any given situation (in this case the moderate storm), distorted thoughts like them are automatically produced out of that negative *Assumption/Rule* and the underlying *Core Belief*.

It is not much better on the sad side, is it? For the person who is experiencing sadness because of distorted thinking, the chain goes like this:



For both the sad and anxious moods, the cure we have learned is to dispute the distorted thoughts by putting each “on trial” and getting to a more truthful view of reality. We start by dealing at the level of *Automatic Thoughts* because these are much easier to “get at” initially than the underlying *Faulty Assumptions/Rules* and the deeper *Core Beliefs*. Additionally, the types of cognitive distortion our *Automatic Thoughts* represent give us clues about how the *Assumptions/Rules* are flawed and what kind of dysfunctional *Core Belief* might be present. It is like a golfer on a tee about to drive the ball down the fairway to the green. The golfer can perhaps see the flag on the pole standing in the cup but cannot see the cup and probably not even the pole from the tee hundreds of yards away. The golfer uses the flag as an indication of where the cup is and tees off. As the golfer approaches the green, the pole becomes more clearly visible. Then, when on the green itself, the golfer can see the cup. The whole point of golf is to get the ball from the tee to the cup in the fewest strokes possible. The same is true for a cognitive approach to dealing with mood. The flag is the *Automatic Thought* that is distorted. It waves at the top of the pole of a *Faulty Assumption/Rule* that stands in the deep cup which is a *Core Belief*. Our ultimate goal is to get to the *Core Belief* but we do so by first sighting the *Distorted Automatic Thought*, then working on the *Faulty Assumption/Rule*, and then by digging out as much of the negative *Core Belief* as possible. The truth is that we can’t totally eliminate a *Core Belief* because it is usually so deeply learned and entrenched. But we can and do attempt to reduce its power as much as possible so that it interferes with our lives much, much less.

Disputing distorted thoughts is a huge start in the whole process of taking greater control of our moods and, for many, is enough to generate a positive change in mood. For others, lasting mood

change will require digging beneath the thoughts and beginning to challenge and correct *Faulty Assumption/Rules* they hold. They may also need to start looking into the deep *Core Belief* they hold about themselves. Understanding where these beliefs came from in the first place may help in learning what they can do to begin to change them or, at least, push back on them. There are many tools, skills, and techniques to do all this. We have already discussed one of them, “examining the evidence”, and have seen how we can use that in another tool, *The SEAT Method*. Happily, there are many more tools available to you listed in the Appendix of this book. If you really want to do this work effectively, I would recommend contacting a psychologist in your area who specializes in cognitive-behavioral therapy. You can find one in your area by using the “Find a Certified Cognitive Therapist” feature on the *Academy of Cognitive Therapy’s* website, www.academyofct.org. S/he can help coach you through this and ensure you succeed. Whether you do it on your own using the tools provided in this book or work with a psychologist to coach you, you will lead yourself much more effectively in terms of your thoughts and feelings if you understand, accept, and act in accordance with the sixth law of life: *what you think determines what you feel*.