

Changing Unhelpful Thoughts

What: Children and caregivers learn to identify and change unhelpful or untrue thoughts that are causing upsetting emotions and negative/unhelpful behaviors that keep the clinical problem going.

Why? Thoughts drive or maintain emotions and behaviors. Recognizing that thoughts are important for changing feelings and behaviors is empowering because thoughts can be changed. When unhelpful or untrue thoughts change, upsetting emotions lessen, and behaviors can be different.

Do: Identify Untrue or Unhelpful Thoughts.

Tell: Explain CBT Triangle (again). Put an unhelpful thought on the triangle. Get feelings and behavior/actions. **Normalize** that unhelpful/negative thoughts cause upsetting feelings and unhelpful behavior.

Anxiety: Something bad will happen. **Depression:** Nothing can change; I am no good. **Behavior problem:** She is unfair. He is doing it on purpose. **Posttraumatic stress:** I can't handle thinking about it. It was my fault.

To orient yourself, imagine a more helpful/true thought.

Use a Technique to Change Thinking.

Socratic Questioning, Compiling Evidence for and Against, Lists and Definitions, Best Friend Role Play...

Remember, ask questions so the child builds the evidence for the new thought (don't TELL the evidence).

Discuss and Assign Weekly Practice. *What new thought can you practice this week? What is one time each day you can practice telling yourself the new thought? When you think the old thought, practice gently correcting yourself—say the NEW thought. What might get in the way of practicing the new thought (problem solve!)? If you notice yourself dwelling on the unhelpful thought, what coping skill can you do? Rate your feelings before and after when you try the new thought and report back.*

Points to Remember:

- Changing thoughts takes some time. It MAY require more than one session.
- You can always try more than one technique.
- When an unhelpful thought is strong and persists even though the client can see how it causes distress, it must serve a function. Figure out what it is so an alternative way of achieving the function can be found.
- Untrue or unhelpful thoughts may be reinforced by the environment. Find out and problem solve. Can the environment be changed? Can family members attend therapy or help the child with other people in their environment? What are options if the environment can't be changed?