

Keeping a Thought Diary

The power of your mind is awesome - changing your thoughts can change your world. Let's start by keeping a thought diary...

Writing down your story can be beneficial in many ways. We know from the narratives we have collected from across the world that you can often trace the root cause of problems by writing down your life story.

Those of you who are familiar with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy will be aware of how our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are interlinked and how, by changing your thoughts, you can alter feelings and

If your thoughts are negative then you'll feel sad. If they are positive then you'll feel happy!

behaviours that occur as a result of those thoughts. Similarly, changing your behaviour can modify your feelings and thoughts.

A thought diary is a tool often used by psychologists. Keeping one is a much more detailed process than simply

writing down your story. It involves making notes on specific thoughts, feelings and behaviours with the view to unravelling problems you might be experiencing. Indeed it can be useful for all of us to periodically examine our thoughts, the reasoning behind them and the behaviours that result from them. After all there's always more than one way of approaching situations and problems that arise in life!

What do you think?

Thought processes, opinions, attitudes and certain behaviours are formed from an early age. They're a result of a combination of influences ranging from our parents' beliefs and lifestyle through to media marketing and a desire to 'fit in' or belong. So it's a good exercise to occasionally examine your thoughts and behaviours as many will be habitual and formed by the opinion of others, or will have developed as a reaction to pleasant and

unpleasant experiences in your past.

Feelings and thoughts are closely interlinked – feelings are triggered by thoughts. For example if your thoughts are negative you will feel sad

Changing your thoughts can alter your feelings and behaviour that occur as a result of those thoughts!

or anxious. If your thoughts are positive then you'll feel happy or calm. This will, in turn, affect your behaviour, even your body language and ultimately the behaviour of others towards you. Let's take a social event as an example. If you find yourself on your own at a party do you think "No-one likes me or wants to be with me", or do you think "There's a good opportunity to meet someone new here"? If you're in the no-one likes me group, then your body language is likely to be guarded, your facial expressions are likely to

reflect your distress. These will put people off approaching you, thus reinforcing your initial thoughts that no one wants to be with you. So it all becomes a vicious cycle.

Of course, feelings can influence thoughts too, but it's much more difficult to

In everyday life we can lose sight of the positive things that happen and focus in on the negative events!

change your feelings, so the best place to start is by examining your thoughts. Make a note of these and set yourself small achievable goals to change them.

If you have a particular behaviour you wish to stop or something you'd love to do, but for some reason can't bring yourself to do, then start by keeping a thought diary to record your thoughts and feelings linked to that behaviour. Examine, and know the thought processes behind that particular behaviour.

As with writing down your story it can often be useful to think back in time to examine your thoughts and how they have changed over a period of months, even years. This will often pinpoint where the behaviour or problem in question originated.

Examine your automatic thoughts in certain situations as they can often be

unhelpful. For example, you may be someone who jumps to conclusions based on your feelings, not based on the actual facts. You may be someone who personalises situations, so if a friend doesn't answer your email you automatically think you've done something to offend them. Whereas the facts are more likely to be that your friend has been too busy to switch on their computer. Other people catastrophise – always thinking of worst case scenarios, whilst some of us have an all or nothing approach – if it happens "I'll be the happiest person alive." If it doesn't "I'll be totally devastated." Whereas the reality will be somewhere in between and not extreme.

Think positive

Over generalisation is another bad thought habit to get into, but probably the one we're most guilty of is getting into a pattern of ignoring positive events. Many of us tend to only remember negative events and these negative thoughts then cause negative feelings, so the cycle is reinforced. In reality many positive things happen every day, but we can lose sight of them, focusing in on the negative issues. So as part of your thought diary it's useful to make a list of all the positive things that have happened each day. If you can't think of any immediately

make yourself jot down five, however small or insignificant they may seem at the time. Perhaps the sky was blue or you woke up in a warm, comfortable bed. This will begin the process of changing those thought patterns to more upbeat ones resulting in more positive feelings and behaviours reinforcing your positive cycles.

Start by sitting down in a quiet place, where you'll be undisturbed. When writing down your thoughts the aim is to be able to look at these without getting distressed. If you have a behaviour you wish to change quite a good trick to employ is to record the event from the outside – as if you're filming it with a video camera, so there is no emotion attached, just the facts. The next step is to write down the feelings you experience during this event.

Look at your behaviour from outside, as if you're filming it, so there's no emotion attached, just the facts!

Did your heart rate go up, for example, did you feel breathless or panicky, frightened or sad?

When you've done this move on to the next stage and jot down the thoughts that led to those feelings. It can also help to record your mood, the time of day, or any activity linked to your

thought processes, as this can help to identify triggers. Leave your diary for a day or two then reassess what you've written. The aim is to obtain a clear picture of any problematic behaviours and the thoughts and feelings behind them. So you're trying to identify the pattern

Use your knitting and stitching time to examine your thoughts without becoming distressed!

of events that have led to your particular thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Similarly if you have a behaviour or activity you're avoiding, such as travelling on public transport, for example, go through the same process.

You can use your knitting and stitching time to examine your thoughts without becoming distressed by them. Find yourself a quiet place, have a note book by your side and use this time to deliberately focus in on your thoughts. Remember to

jot these down as you go.

When you've recorded your thoughts, take a good close look at them and ask yourself, "Are they rational?" "How strongly do I believe them?" "Are there any other explanations?" "What would be the alternative approaches?" "What would happen in the worst case scenario – is that rational or likely?" "How strong are the feelings associated with these thoughts?" "What are they stopping me from doing?" "How are they impacting my life?" "What would I feel like if the problem was resolved?"

Perhaps two of the most useful questions to ask yourself are "What is the factual evidence to show that my thoughts are accurate?", and "If a stranger had the same problem, what advice would I give them?" So you're analysing your thinking and deliberately questioning and challenging your thought processes. You're now moving to the stage where you are beginning to change your habitual thought patterns,

which will lead to changes in feelings and behaviour.

If you want to monitor your progress then you might find it helpful to rate the intensity of your emotions from 0-10, so as time progresses and you reach your goals you can see your improvement at a glance. If you experience distress and are at or near a 10, it's a good idea to have some calming tactics at hand. Your knitting and stitching are excellent tools for achieving instantaneous calm. You can also try breathing and relaxation techniques, but practise these beforehand.

The support you need

It's also possible to break into this cycle by focusing on changing certain behaviours. This will, in turn, change thoughts and feelings. Either way you'll be more successful if you set yourself small achievable goals, so you're taking things one step at a time. Don't forget other Stitchlinks members will be there to support you – you can chat to them anytime on the Forum!

Get started today!

Begin by identifying the problem areas in your life. Start by looking at the most important issue and keep a thought diary based on your thoughts, feelings and behaviours surrounding this issue with a view to improving the problem. It may help to write out 'your story' to identify when the problem arose and why.