

The Psychotherapy File

An aid to understanding ourselves better.

We have all had just one life. What has happened to us, and the sense we made of this, colours the way we see ourselves and others. How we see things is, for us, how things are, and how we go about our lives seems 'obvious and right'. Sometimes, however, our familiar way of understanding and acting can be the source of our problems. In order to solve our difficulties we may need to learn to recognise how what we do makes things worse. We can then work out new ways of thinking and acting.

These pages are intended to suggest ways of thinking about what you do. Recognising your particular patterns is the first step in learning to gain more control and happiness in your life.

Keeping a diary of your moods and behaviour.

Symptoms, bad moods, unwanted thoughts or behaviours that come and go can all be better understood and controlled if you learn to notice when they happen, and what starts them off.

If you have a particular symptom or problem of this sort, start keeping a diary. The diary should be focused on a particular mood, symptom or behaviour, and should be kept every day if possible. Try to record this sequence:

1. How you were feeling about yourself and others and the world before the problem came on.
2. Any external event, or any thought or image in your mind that was going on when the trouble started, or what seemed to start it off.
3. Once the trouble started, what were the thoughts, images or feelings you experienced.

By noticing and writing down in this way what you do and think at these times, you will learn to recognise, and eventually have more control over, how you act and think at the time. It is often the case that negative feelings like resentment, depression or physical symptoms are the result of ways of thinking and acting that are unhelpful. Diary keeping in this way gives you the chance to learn better ways of dealing with things.

It is helpful to keep a daily record for 1-2 weeks, and then discuss what you have recorded with your therapist or counsellor.

Patterns that do not work, but are hard to break

There are certain ways of thinking and acting that do not achieve what we want, but which are hard to change. Read through the lists on the following pages and mark how far you think they apply to you.

Applies strongly ++

Applies +

Does not apply 0

1. Traps

Traps are things that we cannot escape from. Certain kinds of thinking and acting result in a 'vicious circle' when, however hard we try, things seem to get worse instead of better. Trying to deal with feeling bad about ourselves, we think and act in ways that tend to confirm our badness.

Examples of traps

1. Fear of hurting others Trap

Feeling fearful of hurting others* we keep our feelings inside, or put our own needs aside. This tends to allow other people to ignore or abuse us in various ways, which then leads to our feeling, or being, childishly angry. When we see ourselves behaving like this, it confirms our belief that we shouldn't be angry or aggressive and reinforces our avoidance of standing up for our rights.

++	+	0

** People often get trapped in this way because they mix up aggression and assertion. Mostly, being assertive - asking for our rights - is perfectly acceptable. People who do not respect our rights as human beings must either be stood up to or avoided.*

2. Depressed thinking Trap

Feeling depressed, we are sure we will manage a task or social situation badly. Being depressed, we are probably not as effective as we can be, and the depression leads us to exaggerate how badly we handled things. This makes us feel more depressed about ourselves.

++	+	0

3. Trying to please Trap

Feeling uncertain about ourselves and anxious not to upset others, we try to please people by doing what they seem to want. As a result:

1. We end up being taken advantage of by others which makes us angry, depressed or guilty, from which our uncertainty about ourselves is confirmed; or
2. Sometimes we feel out of control because of the need to please, and start hiding away, putting things off, letting people down, which makes other people angry with us and increases our uncertainty.

++	+	0

4. Avoidance Trap

We feel ineffective and anxious about certain situations, such as crowded streets, open spaces, social gatherings. We try to go back into these situations, but feel even more anxiety. However, by constantly avoiding situations our lives are limited and we come to feel increasingly ineffective and anxious.

++	+	0

5. Social isolation Trap

Feeling under-confident about ourselves and anxious not to upset others, we worry that others will find us boring or stupid, so we don't look at people or respond to friendliness. People then see us as unfriendly, so we become more isolated from which we are convinced we are boring and stupid - and become more under-confident.

++	+	0

6. Low self-esteem Trap

Feeling worthless we feel that we cannot get what we want because;

- 1) we will be punished.
- 2) others will reject or abandon us.
- 3) anything good we get is bound to go away or turn sour.
- 4) sometimes it feels as if we must punish ourselves for being weak.

From this we feel that everything is hopeless so we give up trying to do anything, which confirms and increases our sense of worthlessness.

++	+	0

2. Dilemmas (False choices and narrow options)

We often act as we do, even when we are not completely happy with it, because the only other ways we can imagine, seem as bad or even worse. Sometimes we assume connections that are not necessarily the case - as in "If I do 'x' then 'y' will follow". These false choices can be described as either/or or if/then dilemmas. We often don't realise that we see things like this, but we act as if these were the only possible choices.

Do you act as if any of the following false choices rule your life? Recognising them is the first step to changing them.

Choices about myself: I act AS IF:

		++	+	0
1	Either I keep feelings bottled up or I risk being rejected, hurting others, or making a mess.			
2	Either I feel I spoil myself and am greedy or I deny myself things and punish myself and feel miserable.			
3	If I try to be perfect, I feel depressed and angry; If I don't try to be perfect I feel guilty, angry and dissatisfied.			
4	If I must then I won't; it is as if when faced with a task I must either 1) gloomily submit or 2) passively resist. Other people's wishes, or even my own, feel too demanding, so I put things off or avoid them.			
5	If I must not then I will; it is as if the only proof of my existence is my resistance. Other people's rules, or even my own, feel too restricting, so I break rules and do things which are harmful to me.			
6	If other people aren't expecting me to do things for them or look after them, then I feel anxious, lonely and out of control.			
7	If I get what I want I feel childish and guilty; If I don't get what I want, I feel frustrated, angry and depressed.			
8	Either I keep things (feelings, plans) in perfect order, or I fear a terrible mess.			

Choices about how we relate to others: I behave with others AS IF:

		++	+	0
1	Either I'm involved with someone and likely to get hurt or I don't get involved and stay in charge, but remain lonely.			
2	Either I stick up for myself and nobody likes me, or I give in and get put upon by others and feel cross and hurt.			
3	Either I'm a brute or a martyr (secretly blaming others).			
4	a) With others either I'm safely wrapped up in bliss or I'm in combat			
	b) If in combat then I'm either a bully or a victim.			
5	Either I look down on people, or I feel they look down on me.			
6	a) Either I'm sustained by the admiration of others whom I admire, or I feel exposed.			
	b) If exposed then I feel either contemptuous of others, or I feel contemptible.			
7	Either I'm involved with others and feel engulfed, taken over or smothered, or I stay safe and uninvolved but feel lonely and isolated.			
8	When I'm involved with someone whom I care about then either I have to give in or they have to give in.			
9	When I'm involved with someone whom I depend on them either I have to give in or they have to give in.			
10	As a woman either I have to do what others want or I stand up for my rights and get rejected.			
	As a man either I can't have any feelings or I am an emotional mess.			

3. Snags

Snags are what is happening when we say “I want to have a better life, or I want to change my behaviour but...” Sometimes this comes from how we or our families thought about us when we were young; such as “she was always the good child”, or “in our family we never...” Sometimes the snags come from the important people in our lives not wanting us to change, or not able to cope with what our changing means to them. Often the resistance is more indirect, as when a parent, husband or wife becomes ill or depressed when we begin to get better.

In other cases we seem to ‘arrange’ to avoid pleasure or success, or if they come, we have to pay in some way, by depression, or by spoiling things. Often this is because, as children, we came to feel guilty if things went well for us, or felt that we were envied for good luck or success. Sometimes we have come to feel responsible, unreasonably, for things that went wrong in the family, although we may not be aware that this is so. It is helpful to learn to recognise how this sort of pattern is stopping you getting on with your life, for only then can you learn to accept your right to a better life and begin to claim it.

You may get quite depressed when you begin to realise how often you stop your life being happier and more fulfilled. It is important to remember that it is not being stupid or bad, but rather that:

- a) We do these things because this is the way we learned to manage best when we were younger,
- b) we don’t have to keep on doing them now we are learning to recognise them,
- c) by changing our behaviour, we can learn to control not only our own behaviour, but we also change the way other people behave towards us,
- d) although it may seem that others resist the changes we want for ourselves (for example, our parents, or our partners), we often underestimate them; if we are firm about our right to change, those who care for us will usually accept the change.

Do you recognise that you feel limited in your life:

		++	+	0
1	For fear on the response of others: e.g. I must sabotage success, for example 1) as if it deprives others, 2) as if others may envy me or 3) as if there are not enough good things to go around.			
2	By something inside yourself: e.g. I must sabotage good things as if I don’t deserve them.			

4. Difficult and unstable states of mind

Some people find it difficult to keep control over their behaviour and experiences because things feel very difficult and different at times. Indicate which of the following, if any, apply to you:

		++	+	0
1	How I feel about myself and others can be unstable; I can switch from one state of mind to a completely different one.			
2	Some states may be accompanied by intense, extreme and uncontrollable emotions.			
3	Others by emotional blankness, feeling unreal, or feeling muddled.			
4	Some states are accompanied by feeling intensely guilty or angry with myself wanting to hurt myself.			
5	Some states are accompanied by feeling that others can't be trusted, are going to let me down, or hurt me.			
6	Some states are accompanied by being unreasonably angry or hurtful to others.			
7	Sometimes the only way to cope with some confusing feelings is to blank them off and feel emotionally distant to others.			

Continue overleaf if you want to...

Different States

Everybody experiences changes in how they feel about themselves and the world. But for some people these changes are extreme, sometimes sudden and confusing. In such cases there are often a number of states which recur, and learning to recognise them and the shifts between them can be very helpful. Below are a number of descriptions of such states. Identify those which you experience by ringing the number. You can delete or add words to the descriptions and there is a space to add any not listed.

1. Zombie. Cut off from feelings, cut off from others, disconnected.
2. Feeling bad but soldiering on, coping.
3. Out of control rage
4. Extra special. Looking down on others.
5. In control of self, of life, of other people.
6. Cheated by life, by others. Untrusting.
7. Provoking, teasing, seducing, winding up others.
8. Clinging, fearing abandonment.
9. Frenetically active. Too busy to think or feel.
10. Agitated, confused, anxious
11. Feeling perfectly cared for, blissfully close to another.
12. Misunderstood, rejected, abandoned.
13. Contemptuously dismissive of myself.
14. Vulnerable, needy, passively helpless, waiting for rescue.
15. Envious, wanting to harm others, put them down, pull them down.
16. Protective, respecting of myself; of others.
17. Hurting myself, hurting others.
18. Resentfully submitting to demands.
19. Hurt, humiliated by others.
20. Secure in myself, able to be close to others.
21. Intensely critical of self, of others.
22. Frightened of others.
- 23.
- 24.
- 25.