




UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS




A cancer diagnosis can often leave people feeling low and experiencing worry and anxious thoughts.

It is completely normal to feel worried, concerned or sad when confronted with a life-changing situation such as a cancer diagnosis. However, it can lead to feeling stuck in a cycle between worry, thoughts, feelings and body symptoms such as an unsettled stomach, feeling a heaviness in your heart and tightening of the chest.



It can be helpful to understand common patterns of thinking which can lead to these feelings of stuckness. We can then begin to recognise when we are getting trapped in unhelpful ways of thinking and short-sighted by our worries and concerns.



Here are some common unhelpful patterns of thinking:

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1 All or nothing thinking

This occurs when we view situations as all or nothing, for example; black or white, right or wrong, etc.

For example, Mr Smith is going through treatment, and views his cancer as untreatable. He is more likely to adopt the belief of "I might as well give up if this can't be cured".



Mr Smith will be less likely to take his medication on time and keep his appointments, which could impact on his physical health.

A way to help with this type of thinking is to look for positives and challenge the thought. You can do this by thinking about:

1. What your values are, how do these thoughts fit in with your thoughts, questions and decisions.
2. What are the pros and cons to both sides of your argument
3. What are the facts and what are the assumptions you are making
4. What emotions are present for you

Instead of saying "I am a terrible person for not doing anything today" you may say something along the lines of "I may not have done the laundry, but it's amazing that, given how much pain I'm in, I made the bed and showered."

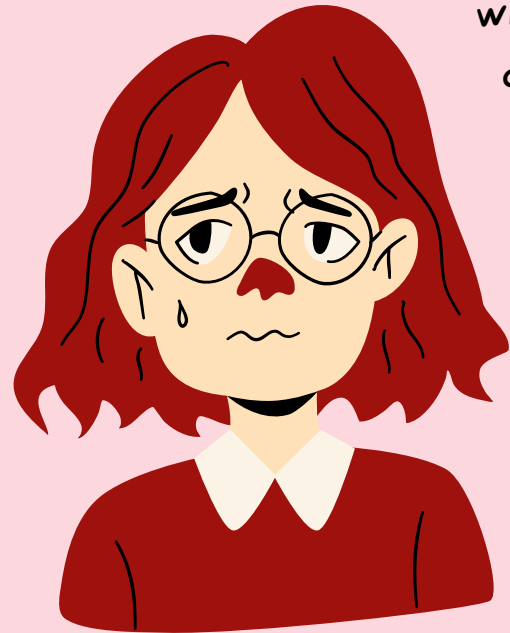
All-or-nothing thinking is rigid and can lead to restriction in your connection with others and leading a richer and more vibrant life.

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Catastrophising

This is believing that the worst outcome will definitely happen and that the outcome is out of our control.



For example, Wendy often thinks about "what if"-s - She finds herself thinking "What if the cancer returns?" "What if I only have weeks to live?" "What if I do something that causes progression?"

A good start is to recognise when and what thoughts lead you to catastrophise. Keeping a notebook or a 'worry list' and writing down every negative thought and your reaction to it can help you see a pattern of when you are likely to catastrophise. Over time, it can make it easier to develop solutions.

A way to counter this type of thinking is to challenge your worries. You can do this by thinking about:

1. What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true?
2. Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
3. What's the probability that what I'm scared of will actually happen?
If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
4. Is the thought helpful to me?
5. What would I say to a friend who had this worry?

Writing these worries down can help you take a step back and view your thoughts with a different perspective.

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Filtering

This occurs when we select parts of information that matches our current beliefs and mood.

For example, Shelley is anxious about discussing treatment options with her clinical nurse specialist. She is feeling anxious about the treatment, she therefore focuses on how painful the treatment could be and does not pay attention to the success rates of the treatment.

Our mood and beliefs can influence what information we take in.

A way to counter this type of thinking is to challenge your assumptions, consider alternative ways of thinking about the problem, and reframing the thought.

Challenge your assumptions

First, think about what evidence you have to back up your belief and thought and what evidence contradicts this. If you don't know what the treatment will be like, you may be worrying about scenarios that may never happen.

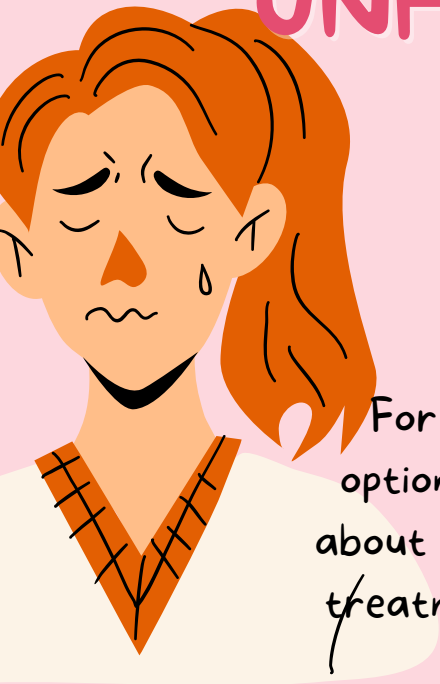
Consider alternatives

Second, if treatment is going to be painful, you may be given medication or alternative therapies to help with that. Remember that your healthcare team are here to help you.

Reframe the thought positively

Third, by undergoing treatment and looking past how painful the treatment may be, what are the potential benefits? What is the success rate? Does the outcome align with your values and wants?

When you find your mental filter taking control, stop for a moment and reframe the thought positively.



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4

Jumping to conclusions

This occurs when we make assumptions about the future.



For example, Sheila found her first chemotherapy session very tiring. She tells herself that this is how it's going to be for the rest of her treatment.

John is sitting opposite a healthcare professional and is awaiting his result. He believes that the test results are bad simply by looking at the healthcare professional.

The conclusions we can jump to can be quite distressing for us, therefore it is good to pause and take a moment and try to pace your thoughts.

A way to counter this type of thinking is to remember back to a time when jumping to conclusions was not effective, taking a step back to see the whole picture and check the evidence.

1. Remember back to a time when you were wrong to jump to conclusions.
John is not aware of the outcome of his result, if he jumps to conclusions he will make himself feel more anxious and worried.
2. Taking a step back: Do you see the whole picture? Do you have all the information to make an informed decision?
3. Check the evidence: What evidence do you have to support the conclusion you have reached? Are your thoughts based on facts or feelings?

Jumping to conclusions can lead to negative situations and thoughts. It is important to stop, think things through, and then make an informed decision.

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5 Personalisation

This occurs when we start blaming ourselves for our circumstances – in this case for having cancer.

For example, Katya thinks “I am being punished because of all the bad things I have done” or “I have cancer because I am a smoker/drinker”.



In this case, Katya is blaming herself for her diagnosis. This way of thinking is unhelpful as Katya might beat herself up over it and it may lead to her having a low self-esteem and withdrawing from doing things she previously enjoyed.

A way to counter this type of thinking is to think about control and responsibility.

1. Check Your Control: When you feel yourself beginning to blame yourself, ask yourself what you are actually in control of here. Did you have control over all the factors that led to the outcome you're blaming yourself for?

Chances are good that you did not and your blame is misplaced.

2. Check Your Responsibility: When you begin placing blame on yourself for how you assume someone else is feeling, ask yourself, “Am I responsible for how they think or feel?”



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'Shoulds', 'Could's', and 'Would's'

This occurs when we start telling ourselves that we should be able to do things differently.

For example, Jonah finds themselves thinking I should be able to go back to work after treatment.

Mohammad often finds himself thinking 'I would have been able to look after my family if I didn't have cancer' and 'I could have done something to reduce the chances of me getting cancer'.

A way to counter this type of thinking is to be aware of and reframe these 'should', 'could', and 'would' thoughts.

Start by writing these types of thoughts down. Look at what you are saying about yourself and the emotions that arise with those thoughts and start to think about how you could reword these thoughts.

In Jonah's case, he can acknowledge his wants and reframe his thoughts in a way that is more realistic. He could say "I am aware that I would like to go back to work and I am working hard toward that goal in ways that are achievable for me" rather than using negative language.



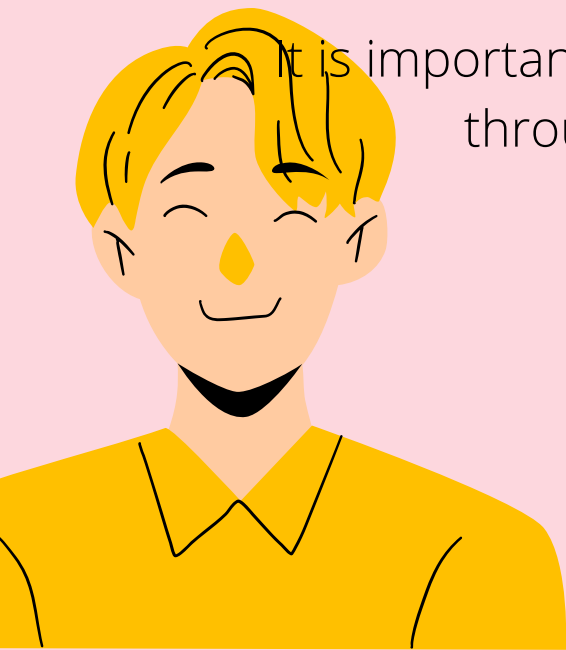
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It is **important to note** that the strategies above may help for some people and not for others. You can pick and choose what works best for you.

Being mindful of your negative thoughts and aware of the fact that you have a choice for managing them, can in itself help you to start to feel back in control.

Some of these unhelpful thinking patterns may arise at different points in time. For some it may happen straightaway e.g. after consenting to a mastectomy. But for others it may happen long after their treatment has finished.



It is important to be kind to yourself as you go through your cancer journey.

