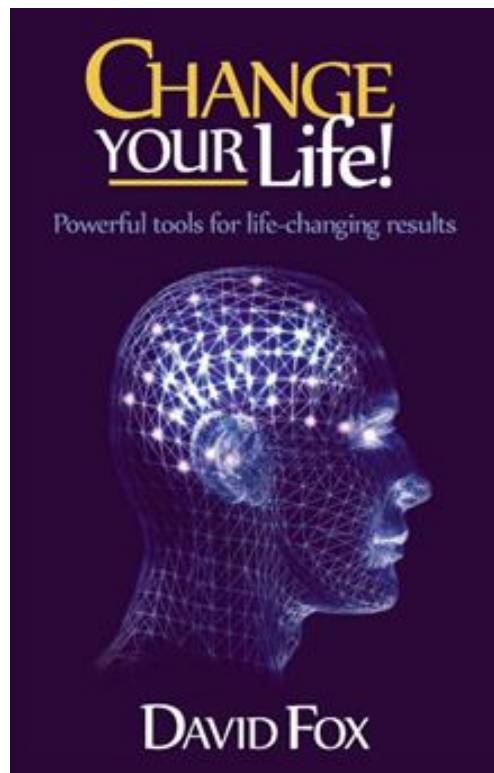


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CHAPTER 6 — The Conscious Way to Change Your Mind

As explained in the previous chapter, the first step in learning to change your mind is to begin to have awareness. This awareness is an internal awareness of your “state of mind” on a continuous basis and that would involve careful attention to what you are thinking. Your thoughts are the keys to your beliefs and to the reasons your life is the way it is at the present moment. Everything starts with your thoughts. The first major breakthrough and success you will have as you begin this journey is to become *aware*.

Many people go through life unaware of how their thinking controls so much in their lives. They don't think about thinking! They are on automatic pilot and work from a very externally focused point of view. They view the events in their lives as having direct impact on them and their emotions without considering there may be a part which thinking plays in how they feel and how they respond to everything in their lives. And of course, they would never stop, take a step back from their own thinking, and review the content of their minds. They don't question the validity of their interpretation of events. If something happens to them that is “bad,” they must naturally just feel bad and act accordingly. But there is another way, a much better way that provides more control over your thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in life. And the outcome of this is the achievement of what you want, the attainment of great peace of mind, and subsequently lower levels of anxiety, stress, and depression. This is what I try to achieve with every client I see for counselling. With the

application of the tools and techniques you are about to learn in this chapter and the rest of this book, you too can attain these same results.

Most people believe that the sequence or chain of events that occurs with regards to themselves and their environment goes something like this:

The event:
(e.g., seeing a beautiful sunrise)



The Outcome: I feel great! That *makes* me feel good!

The actual sequence of events (shown below) would be more fully stated in the following way:

The event:
(e.g., seeing a beautiful sunrise)



You see the sunrise, you attach meaning to it.

The Outcome: I feel great! That *makes* me feel good!

When you see the “activating” event (the sunrise in this case), it wouldn’t mean anything to you unless you had some thought about it. If you were distracted by something else at the time and you were thinking about something horrible that had happened, you might not even notice the sunrise, much less feel really good about seeing it. This goes to show that it is not the actual event outside yourself that “causes” you to have an emotional reaction of feeling good. It is you, through your seeing that sunrise, making sense out of it in your mind and attaching value and meaning to it that sets up the emotion or feelings that create that wonderful feeling inside when you see a beautiful sunset.

Most of the time the sequence of events, thoughts, beliefs, and emotional reactions occur so quickly that we aren’t even aware that it’s happening. Through years of “thinking without

thinking,” we have pretty much let life happen to us and let ourselves experience any emotion or feeling that happens to come up from there. What you are going to learn now is that you have so much more power to control your thoughts, beliefs, and emotional states than you would ever have believed possible.

For now, it is a great step just to realize that most of your thinking up to now has been automatic. It happens without much of your own conscious awareness and without you working on choosing the thoughts that you want to have. As explained earlier, you can start to write down your thoughts and keep a thought journal so that you can start to work with your thoughts. If something happens to you, let’s say you get stuck in a traffic jam, and you immediately feel frustrated and irritated, stop for a second and think over the thoughts you have had from before the traffic jam until you got into it. You were feeling pretty good and enjoying your day, thinking about the nice movie you saw last night and then you noticed the traffic jam up ahead. What were your exact thoughts as soon as you saw the jam? Make a mental note of those thoughts and write them down as soon as you can so you can examine them later using the techniques to follow.

They might go something like this:

“I can’t believe this! Now I am going to be late for work and get into trouble with the boss. Why does this always happen to me? What a horrible way to start the day!”

Right! Now you have caught your first thought pattern. It’s like a game of fishing with the event acting as your bait to bring out your habitual thoughts and beliefs! You could even turn it into a game if you want as this may help you not take the whole process too seriously and it will help you see the funny side and avoid being pulled down by your emotions too much. Once you have compiled a rough set of thoughts that have caused you trouble throughout the previous days or maybe weeks, you can then sit down and begin to work with them with the techniques below. Before we go into them however, I would like to give you some background on the following methods to change your mind.

As described earlier in the book, the field of cognitive psychology and later rational-emotive behavior therapy began in the 1950s and quickly spread throughout the psychology profession as it gained more and more popularity.

I believe that part of the reason it spread so quickly and established itself as a highly influential movement within the psychotherapy communities was that it was just so effective. The time frames for recovery of clients were shorter and major improvements in mood disorders were seen when the cognitive-behavioural approach was used.

In the introduction to his book *Feeling Good: A New Mood Therapy*¹, Dr. David Burns, a prominent psychiatrist, describes how the techniques used by cognitive psychologists have been tested experimentally with groups of depressed patients. The patients were divided into groups. Some were given anti-depressants only, some were given anti-depressants and

¹ Burns, D. 1991. *Feeling Good: A New Mood Therapy*.

cognitive-behavioural treatment and others were only given cognitive-behavioural treatment. The amazing results of this study showed that the patients who only had cognitive-behavioural therapy improved more dramatically and stayed better (as detailed in follow-up studies years later) than both of the other groups!

Dr. Burns showed just how effective the conscious method of dealing with your thoughts, moods, beliefs, and behaviours can be. I have used the techniques and tools firstly in my own life and secondly to help others when they have approached me for counselling. I know how effective they are and that is why I would like to share them with you — along with the other ideas, techniques and methods that will be outlined in the rest of the book — because I have seen how they can transform a person's life from abnormally low self-esteem to a healthy, reasonable self-esteem. I have seen it break down and cure phobias (from being terrified of flying in a plane to being petrified of mice and rats). I have seen it lift people out of depression and I have seen it help people who suffer from anxiety start to lead normal, peaceful, and calmer lives.

As I have said, the research behind the methods was developed working with people who suffered from depression, but these tools and techniques can be (and have been) used to help people from all walks of life with any manner of problems facing them. We all need to work on our thoughts and we all get ourselves into a little trouble here and there when we let our thoughts rule our lives and control all our emotions. From the employee who thinks that no one likes him or her and that people are always laughing behind his or her back, to the lady who wants to be the perfect mother and keeps losing the battle of being perfect — ridiculing herself and blaming herself for not being able to do it all. We all have our demons and thoughts that haunt us every now and then that make our lives more difficult and sometimes seemingly too difficult to handle. But there is always a way to see it from a different angle and fundamentally change your perception about what is going on and what things mean to you. When you learn to master your thoughts, you will master your emotions and your destiny.

Dr. Albert Ellis and later Dr. Aaron T. Beck explained that our thought patterns and beliefs worked so quickly in any given situation that the thoughts that cross our minds on a day-to-day basis are practically automatic in nature. We don't realize what we are thinking until we have an emotional reaction to it. The negative automatic thoughts or, rearranged, ANTS (automatic negative thoughts), that we have can run across our minds so fast — literally like incredibly fast little ANTS — that we don't take any notice of them. After many years of working with the types of thoughts and grouping of thoughts that people have (especially the kinds of thoughts that depressed people have), Dr. Beck developed categories that most of them seemed to fall into. These categories are also known as *cognitive distortions*. These categories are extremely useful when you want to see whether a thought you have had is realistic and rational or whether it is an irrational and negative thought that needs to be reviewed and changed.

Just before we get into the actual categories I want to provide you with a quick little acid test that you can use when you need to check whether your thoughts are helping you or

harming you. First catch the thought you are having and then ask yourself these three questions:

1. Do I know if this thought is 100 percent true and accurate?
2. Is this thought useful?
3. Does this thought help me achieve any of my immediate goals?

If you answer no to any of these questions, you probably need to look at discarding the thought and thinking of some alternatives.

OK, so here are the categories of thoughts you need to study and get to know very well.

The 10 major categories of distorted thoughts

1. Fortune Telling and Mind Reading

Let's take **Mind Reading** first. We all do this to a greater or lesser extent every day. I know that I often have to remind myself when I am using this mental distortion and to force myself to hold off on judging a situation or a person until real, hard facts and evidence present themselves to justify any thoughts I may have. When you are using this mental distortion or when it is happening in your mind, you often mistakenly think that you can tell what other people are thinking about you. You might meet someone for the first time and think that that person probably has a certain opinion of you, that they have judged you in a certain way. For example, that person is really good looking and you imagine that they think you are beneath them and not worth talking to. In response, you decide that you won't approach them or be open to them as a human being and a possible friend or romantic interest. That is the concept of mind reading. If you catch yourself thinking that you just "know" what that person is thinking about you, think again. Unless you have some psychic abilities that the rest of us don't have and you can hear what people are thinking, then you need to learn to hold off on imagining what they think. You need to take a step back, remind yourself to be objective and not to judge. Rather be open to that person and to anything that may come of your encounter with that person. We can often miss out on some really great relationships, business associates, and lovers if we don't learn to silence the mind-reading maniac we all seem to have in our heads. We love to just imagine what the other person is thinking or feeling and then we go right ahead and respond to that person as if they had really said or felt what we think they did! I used to think that those soap operas were overly dramatic when they showed someone imagining what their lover was thinking or doing and then getting all upset over their imaginings, but guess what — it's true to life! We all do this.

Next, let's discuss the cognitive distortion of **Fortune Telling**. This one is pretty straightforward. It means that we try to predict what will happen in the future. Any time you or I try to imagine what will happen and predict the course of life, we may be setting ourselves up for a disappointment. Alternatively, we may be pleasantly surprised by an outcome we could never have predicted. Life does work like that; we

plan, we strategize and try and think about all the possible outcomes of a particular course of action but we can never really be sure which way it's going to go. People who use this distortion will commonly say things to themselves such as: "I'll never make the team," "It's not worth trying because I know I am going to be rejected anyway," "What's the point of going to this party? I know I'm not going to meet anyone and I'll probably just have a lousy time." It's a simple one to recognise as being faulty or irrational thinking, but so few people actually look at these thoughts and say to themselves that the thoughts are irrational. They will often believe the thought and then act on their belief in that thought being their objective reality. The truth is that we just never can tell what will happen, who we will meet, how good a time we are going to have, how successful our efforts will be, unless we go out there and try or unless we actually get there and see for ourselves whether what we thought would happen actually did happen. Again, be careful of this because if you continue to believe hard enough that something will happen, positive or negative, it might just happen. Affirm a positive outcome and go and see for yourself — without any preconceived ideas — that's what it's all about.

You can see from the two explanations above of Mind Reading and Fortune-Telling why they fall into the same category. It's because in each instance you are trying to predict or imagine what someone is thinking or that something will happen, without any objective facts to support your prediction or imagination.

2. Negative Mental Filter

This distortion of the **Negative Mental Filter** is like a net that we have thrown across the river of our lives. While everything goes through the net, such as the evidence of good things in our lives and the everyday positives and things we have to be happy about — we have set our nets to catch only the "bad" or negative things that happen to us. Whenever we look at our life or a particular situation in it, we focus on everything that is wrong with it. We ignore the good and the positive and let it slip through our nets (our filter) without a trace. So much of life is really all about what you focus on and what you give meaning to. It's all about your own perspective and how you rate events and situations. When we use a Negative Mental Filter, we actively see only the negative. We often don't even try to see the good or positive things in our lives. All you need to do when you find yourself using this cognitive distortion is learn to take the filter off (like taking a pair of dirty glasses off) and view your life more objectively — the good and the "bad". Give your focus and filter a good cleaning out so that you are able to see both sides of the coin and learn to be more objective and rational about your life. To go one better, I would say that you should create a pair of glasses (or a mental filter) that is skewed to filter more positive into your life. You should be actively seeking out and focusing more on the positives than the negatives. It takes just the same amount of effort as the Negative Mental Filter and it is a lot more beneficial to you. I am not saying that you need to become delusional and have visions of grandeur, but I am saying that life is full of positives, of things to be happy about and grateful for, and it just makes much more

sense to focus on those than to focus on all the perceived negatives in your life. That's really changing your mind!

3. All-or-Nothing Thinking

When you are using this cognitive distortion you see the world only in terms of right or wrong, black or white, yes and no, winners and losers. **All-or-Nothing Thinking** does not allow for the in-between, the gray areas in life. It also leaves no room for improvement and is very critical of any errors or anything that is not "perfect." There are people who think that they won't try doing something unless they can be really good at it, otherwise what's the point, right? By scrutinizing that kind of thinking we can see that it's the kind of thinking used by perfectionists and perfectionists tend to be very hard on themselves and others as well and usually become very tense and stressed out. People who use this type of distorted thinking most probably had quite harsh parents who weren't happy unless they were achieving the highest marks or the best results. Their outer critics (their parents) became inner critics in the form of a script in their heads or a little voice that says to them that they aren't good enough unless they are the best. It is a very harsh way of thinking and it can kill any kind of motivation before it begins. The fear of not doing or being the best or at least being very good is far larger than the idea of just enjoying what you are doing — no matter how much you suck at it! I like the idea that there is *no such thing as failure and that there are only results* (thanks Tony Robbins!). That's a brilliant belief to cultivate, an excellent way to change your mind, because when you have this belief going for you, you cannot lose. You can always be somewhere on the ladder of achievement and results and you can always take a step higher. There are very few cut and dried issues in the world. Many things are open for debate — why should your so-called "failures" be any different. You have not failed; you have only achieved a certain set of results. They may not be what you wanted, but you can always try again tomorrow, or the next day, and keep improving and changing until you achieve what you want. Don't black or white your life or anything in it, colour it in all the wonderful colours of the rainbow. Life is very rich and varied, so there is no need to see things in only black or white.

4. Catastrophising (Magnifying and Minimizing)

When we use this cognitive distortion, we are in effect blowing things out of proportion or conversely making things seem smaller than they really are. The funny thing is that we use magnification, or **Catastrophising**, for all the bad things in our lives and we use minimization for all the good. Dr. David Burns calls this the "binocular trick" because it's like looking through the wrong side of a binoculars when we look at ourselves and our achievements — in which case they seem rather small and insignificant, and we look at our problems and our mistakes or faults with the magnifying side of the binoculars — in which case we blow them way out of proportion to their real size. Anyone would begin to feel absolutely miserable if they did this on a continuous basis. It's like using anything you can to make yourself feel worthless and useless while minimizing or even totally ignoring your good or even

excellent qualities! What a ridiculous thing to do to yourself and yet so many people do it, every day. I do it, my patients do it, we all do it to some extent and the trick is to learn when we are doing it and push ourselves to stop it.

5. Emotional Reasoning

This distortion is quite a strong one, as it not only involves what you are thinking but also is integrally linked to your emotions. **Emotional Reasoning** is when you take the saying: “I think, therefore I am” and change it to: “I feel, therefore it is so.” You decide that because you feel a certain way at the moment, your circumstances, your life must be actually that bad. You may be feeling low for whatever reason and because you are physically and emotionally low, you tend to assume that something must be really wrong with your life. The problem with emotional reasoning is that it feeds back into your thoughts and beliefs and can lead into a negative spiral if you aren’t careful about catching yourself when you are doing it. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that because you feel a certain way, your life is going down the tubes and all is lost! When you have worked with the thoughts and taken some physical action, as we will discuss in another chapter, you will find that your feelings will lift and you will start to think much more positively and rationally about your life. There may even be times when you cannot believe how negatively you were thinking and feeling about everything in your life, even something as simple as burning the toast in the morning! One of the biggest bits of advice to you when you are in the middle of an emotional reasoning distortion and negativity cycle is to never allow yourself to think about anything important in your life. Don’t try to make any decisions about your life, either. When you are on this emotional roller coaster, it’s best to sit it out and wait until you are able to think more clearly before making any life changing decisions. Just accept that it is a little emotional storm and it will pass if you don’t get too caught up in it. By using some of the techniques described in this book, you should be able to pull yourself out of it quite quickly.

6. Labeling

When you **Label** something or someone, you are in effect limiting that object or person to the label you have given. Your label may not be accurate, but once labelled; you may feel compelled to stick to it, no matter how much evidence there may be to the contrary. This is especially irrational when it comes to people, and especially ourselves, because we are so dynamic and changing that to label ourselves as stupid, clumsy, lazy and other such terms does not reflect the whole truth. I cannot say that because I didn’t pick up my clothes this morning that this means I am a sloth and a lazy, good-for-nothing idiot, can I? Some people might say that I could and that it would be justified. The problem is that I am using one action (or inaction in this case) to label myself — my whole personality and everything that goes with it — as lazy and good-for-nothing. I am sure that if I went back in my mind, I could find plenty of evidence for just the opposite of being a lazy, good-for-nothing idiot. I am sure I could find times when I diligently went about cleaning up after myself and when I even helped to clean the whole house. This would be

evidence that would be in contradiction to the label I gave myself and so this is why the label and the act of labeling is a cognitive distortion. In cognitive psychology there is another term for this type of activity that is known as stereotyping. When you stereotype yourself or someone else, you in effect take a little bit of information about that person or yourself and use it to class them or categorize them as a particular type. You may do this in your mind to help simplify information and to help you understand your world faster, but it is not necessarily the best way to sort information in your brain and come to any realistic conclusions. This is because your conclusions would be based on very little factual information and would hardly stand up to the scrutiny of a scientific approach to fact finding! Another point to remember is that when someone else has done something that you don't like, let's say they stood on your toe in the line in the bank, for example: if you were to swear at them in your head and label them a clumsy idiot then that would be a cognitive distortion. It would be much more accurate to say that their behaviour or the action that they took in that moment was a bit clumsy but that does not say anything about them as a person. You should much rather label the behaviour than the person. This would especially apply to the way a parent talks to a child. If you label your child stupid when he does something you don't think is right and you actually say to him: "How can you be so stupid!" you are labeling your child instead of labeling the behaviour. I am sure I don't have to tell you how damaging such remarks would be to a child or teenager. If you need to say something, it would be much more rational to say to your child: "What you just *did* was not thoughtful and I know you are usually a more thoughtful person. What you just *did* was not right, but I am sure you will *do* it right next time." I know that might sound long-winded, but I am sure you get the general idea. Don't apply meaningless labels to yourself or others, it doesn't help them or you, in fact, it will probably just get your own or other people's emotions out of whack for nothing!

7. Personalisation

When you **Personalize** a situation or incident, what you are in effect doing is blaming yourself for something that was never in your direct control, physically or mentally. This would include your perceived control over what others do. People will often attribute negative events to themselves and positive events to outside influences such as luck or coincidence. This is also known as false attribution. When you blame yourself for negative events in your life, which you had no direct control over, you are personalizing them and causing yourself a great deal of unnecessary guilt. As Dr. Burns explains in his book: you may have some influence over people (especially if you are their teacher, parent or friend) but you cannot control their thoughts and their actions. What they do is their own full responsibility and should not leave you feeling responsible or guilt-ridden. Most of the time all you can do is offer your advice and support. People tend to do what they want to do anyway, so blaming yourself is not going to help the situation and is most probably not an accurate reflection of the situation. This applies equally to situations or events that happen in your life that you have no real control over. This often leads into the

thinking of: “If only I had...” and can lead to terrible guilt and remorse that is mostly unfounded.

8. Should Statements

We all do this. We all like to motivate ourselves by saying: “I really should do this” or “I really have to get going with that. **Should Statements** also involve the use of the following words:

- Must
- Better (as in “I better get it done”)
- Ought to

These are not very motivating words and they often only create pressure and tension in our minds. By telling yourself you “better do this” or you “have to do that” you place yourself under emotional strain and unless you do what you’re told (even if it’s telling yourself!) it feels like there will be dire consequences. Who wants to live with that kind of tirade going on in their heads? We had parents and teachers who did this for us when we were young, why on earth would we want to carry it on in our own heads when we become adults? Some people do. They think that that is how they can get the best out of themselves and motivate themselves to get going. Let’s take a look at some other words that we could use that may be more motivating, less harsh and easier on the stomach lining!

- I *want* to...
- I would *like* to...
- I *enjoy*...
- I *am going* to...

Much better! I *would rather* use those words than any of the others above them. One writer called the cognitive distortion of Should Statements, “shoulding on yourself”! What we need to realize in coming to grips with this distortion, is that there are very few things we really *have to* do. We always have options, even if those options may not get us the best or most friendly results. We may feel that we have to go and get some milk and bread for the house, but by telling ourselves “I have to go and get milk and bread,” it really makes it sound like a chore doesn’t it? We don’t really have to do it, do we? We could, if we so chose, not go and get the milk and bread. No one is holding a gun to our heads to go and get it. Sometimes we put ourselves in an imaginary prison cell where our lives are restricted and we don’t have any options. That is a very stressful and unintelligent way to live, especially when we do it to ourselves!

Overall, I have found that whenever I catch myself “shoulding” on myself and trying to get myself to take action that way, it is always easier to use the softer words, the more motivating words. Try it for yourself, it works wonders for the digestion!

9. Overgeneralization

We're nearly there now! When using **Overgeneralization**, we are taking one example of something that has happened to us either now or in the past, and are using that example as evidence of how it is always going to be in the future. In a way this is a similar distortion to Mind Reading and Fortune Telling in terms of us trying to predict what will happen. We stop ourselves from trying again because we think that because it happened once, twice, or even three times, it is bound to happen again and that we now have evidence enough to prove that we are useless (Labeling!) or that we cannot achieve something we have set our hearts on achieving (Fortune Telling!). As you can see, the cognitive distortions can often be intermingled and linked to each other and one line of thinking may have more than one cognitive distortion in it. The more distortions you can find in your line of thinking, the more obvious it should be to you that you are thinking in irrational ways and that you need to identify and change your thoughts and beliefs

10. Disqualifying the Positive

This final cognitive distortion, **Disqualifying the Positive**, is very similar to the one on the negative mental filter. The difference is that, whereas with the negative mental filter you only focus on the negative and you tend to ignore the positive, with this distortion you are made aware of the positive or you can see the positive for yourself, but you make the decision that the positive happened by chance, luck, coincidence or anything else you fancy. You resolutely refuse to see that the evidence you have of the positive is directly disputing your negative or faulty belief. You dismiss the positive and decide that the real objective truth is found in the negative (or what you may call the "realistic") evidence you have about your world! Can you believe we do this to ourselves? You bet we do.

How it works in practice

When you find a thought or pattern of thoughts that have been distressing you, nine out of ten times you will find that they fall into one of these categories. If the thought doesn't fall into any of these categories, it may be rational, in which case you will then need to find a better way to deal with the situation or emotion. This is when the rest of the techniques in this book will be helpful because we cannot deny that there may be situations and events that are real and cannot be classified as merely irrational thinking. You may then need to find other ways to change your mind and your emotions (assuming they need changing at all at that particular time). As I have said, this is why I have decided to include a variety of methods to help you change your mind and your life because one should never only rely on one approach, especially if there is a definite benefit to using another technique. I believe in using whatever works for you and whatever you find the most effective in helping you improve your life and changing anything you want to change. As they say, "If the shoe fits, wear it!"

Bianca — Why do bad things always happen to me?!

Lets go back to the lady I described earlier who had the belief entrenched in her mind that she was the cause of all the bad things that happened to her and anyone she loved. When we were early into her counselling, we worked with an incident that had happened to her the week before. Her mobile phone had been stolen in a shopping mall and when she realised it had been stolen, she got so upset she couldn't stop crying for hours. Now, most people would find an event like this very upsetting to say the least. However, most people would be able to get past the event after a day or two and they would also not come out with the thoughts that this young lady did when I asked her to remember exactly what she thought just after the incident occurred. They went something like this:

“I can't believe this has happened, it's all my fault”

“It's just my luck, this always happens to me. Nobody else has such bad luck”

“I brought this on myself because I am a bad person”

“God hates me and he is punishing me.”

Wow, now those are not just ANTS she is dealing with, those thoughts are silent killers and have the potential to be very damaging and even lethal because they indicate an underlying belief system that is filled with distortions, half-truths, and outright lies about any objective reality of the situation. Can you imagine the emotions that accompanied this little tyranny of destructive thoughts and beliefs? She was an emotional wreck and every time something like this happened, she used it to verify that her beliefs were true because negative events like this truly seemed to be attracted to her. As I explained earlier, be very careful what you put into your subconscious mind because it will create your reality and it will even act as a self-fulfilling prophesy as it did for this young lady.

Now, let's see how we dealt with those thoughts using the categories above as a guideline. Starting with the first thought:

“I can't believe this has happened, it's all my fault.”

This thought falls into the category of **Personalisation** for something that was completely out of her own physical and mental control. It is very self-defeating to blame herself for something she could not have avoided. If she had been careless and had been walking around with her handbag wide open with her mobile phone in plain view, then there is the possibility that there was some element of her own fault involved. But, these thieves, being professionals, could have taken the phone off anyone, even a security-conscious person, so there was really no basis for her thoughts that the theft of her phone was her own fault. It would have been much more helpful to her psychologically if she had gotten mad at them for stealing her phone than to get upset and blame herself for what happened. So we caught that thought, recognised it as a thought that belonged to the cognitive distortion of

Personalisation, and then we disputed the thought with a more rational belief about what happened.

There is a specific tool that you can use for working with your thoughts — I call it the thought worksheet. I have included a copy for you in the appendix.

During counselling with this young lady, we used the thought worksheet and this is how it came out for her:

Trigger	ANT	Emotion	Behavioural Reaction	Category	PAT	% Belief in PAT
Mobile phone stolen	“I can’t believe this has happened, it’s all my fault”	Despondent Angry Frustrated Humiliated Upset	Crying Shaking Lashed out at friends Screamed at the cat	Personalisation: The thought that was identified fell into this category of cognitive distortions	I am usually very careful, besides, it could’ve happened to anyone. It’s not my fault that thieves stole from me!	60%

Now, you may notice that she only gave it a 60 percent belief in terms of her truly believing the PAT as opposed to the ANT. This is, however, a major step forward and many people may have even put a 10 percent or 20 percent belief in the PAT. Remember what I said earlier: you don’t have to believe the new thoughts or beliefs right away. Just the act of writing down your thoughts and working with them in this way helps you to shed light on what is going on in your mind and helps you start to feel better pretty quickly. The best thing about writing it out in this fashion is that whenever you have the thoughts again and you identify them as the same thoughts and beliefs, you don’t have to do the work all over again, you can just pull out your journal and read through what you wrote the last time. Or, if you prefer, you could rewrite what you wrote and just give a new percentage belief in the PAT. What you will find as you keep at it is that those percentages will start to increase and you will start believing in the PATs as opposed to the ANTs. The stronger your negative thoughts and beliefs and the more entrenched they are, the more you might have to keep repeating the alternative thoughts. I would like to suggest that you not only write it out, but that once you have that positive, more rational thought written down, you say it out loud and with some conviction. Hearing the positive statements being spoken by your own voice can be very powerful and will engage you with the thought even more.

Take a look at the second thought she had:

“It’s just my luck, this always happens to me. Nobody else has such bad luck.”

You can see from this thought that there are some underlying beliefs going on here. “This always happens to me” would indicate that she believes there is something about herself that attracts negative events (and possibly people) into her life. What label would you give this thought? If someone is saying that something *always* happens to him or her and that it *never* happens to anyone else, they are using the cognitive distortion of...

Overgeneralization! Why? Because Overgeneralization is when you take a single event and generalize it to your whole life.

Let’s see how it looks on paper:

Trigger	ANT	Emotion	Behavioural Reaction	Category	PAT	% Belief in PAT
Mobile phone stolen	“It’s just my luck, this always happens to me. Nobody else has such bad luck”	Despondent Angry Frustrated Humiliated Upset	Crying Shaking Lashed out at friends Screamed at the cat	Overgeneralization: The thought that was identified fell into this category of cognitive distortions	I have never actually had my mobile phone stolen before. It definitely does happen to a lot of other people. Negative things do happen, but I can’t say whether it’s because I have bad luck!	50%

The third thought was:

“I brought this on myself because I am a bad person.”

This one may involve two different cognitive distortions: Personalisation and Labeling. It can be classified as Personalisation because she is again blaming herself for something that was out of her control and it can also be called labeling because she has referred to herself as a bad person from an event that could never really indicate anything about her intrinsic “goodness” or “badness.” As Dr. Burns says, we cannot try to define ourselves with labels like these. We are very complex and to try to label ourselves as good, bad, ugly, etc., is not possible because we are so much more than a label. We cannot fit into such a narrow classification of who we are, what we think and how we feel.

Working with this thought, we would have a table like this:

Trigger	ANT	Emotion	Behavioural Reaction	Category	PAT	% Belief in PAT
Mobile phone stolen	“I brought this on myself because I am a bad person.”	Despondent Angry at Self Frustrated Humiliated Upset	Crying Shaking Lashed out at friends Screamed at the cat	Personalisation and Labeling: The thought that was identified fell into these two categories of cognitive distortions	I am not a bad person. Nothing I did in this situation was my own fault. I cannot say I am bad because I am too complex a person to be labelled so easily and I have many good and kind qualities too.	70%

She could see more clearly (and she even laughed out loud a bit) with this one that it didn't mean she was bad and had no bearing whatsoever on who she was as a human being.

The final thought was:

“God hates me and he is punishing me.”

As discussed under the category of Mind Reading, we cannot know what anyone is thinking, and that would definitely include God! If we cannot even know what the people who are closest to us are really thinking, how could we ever propose to know and understand what God is thinking and why things happen in life the way they do. We may, in hindsight, see why something happened to us and what we needed to learn from it and then possibly infer that that was what God wanted us to learn or understand, but we cannot say for any certainty what God has in mind for us. Of course this is assuming that you believe in God or a higher power in the universe.

Let's look at the worksheet:

Trigger	ANT	Emotion	Behavioural Reaction	Category	PAT	% Belief in PAT
Mobile phone stolen	"God hates me and he is punishing me"	Despondent Sad Humiliated Upset Lost Confused Hopeless	Crying Shaking Lashed out at friends Screamed at the cat	Mind Reading: The thought that was identified fell into these two categories of cognitive distortions	I really have no way of knowing why this happened to me at this moment. It happened for a reason, which I may understand sometime in the future. I am not a bad person, God doesn't hate me — hate is a human emotion.	70%

Although it can be difficult to go into this type of exercise when religious beliefs are involved, it is still possible to work with rational thinking to help avoid any irrational and negative beliefs a person might have about her life.

The above examples should give you a fairly good idea of the process that you can use to work with your thoughts. As mentioned previously, I have included a worksheet at the back of the book that you can use for your thought work. I would suggest that you get yourself a hardcover book that will become your thought journal, where you can begin to take note of the thoughts that you have when you find yourself feeling down or emotionally on edge. What I actually prefer to do is save the worksheets with today's date and a keyword about the content into a separate folder on my lap top and then just password protect the file. You end up having a rich history of your thinking and how it has changed over the years which can be invaluable to your personal growth.

Remember, it all starts with becoming aware of your thinking. Don't get upset with yourself for thinking irrationally or if you slip and you find yourself thinking negative thoughts. The first step is to be able to recognise when you are thinking using a cognitive distortion. Always give yourself a pat on the back for catching a negative thought or mood. This will

encourage you to keep at it, even if you aren't an expert yet at dealing with those thoughts using the above system. In time, as you work more and more with writing the thoughts down and disputing them, those particular thoughts and beliefs will begin to change and soon you will no longer need to work with them on paper because you will have cut a new groove in your brain — a new neural pathway — that will automatically dispute the negative thought or belief and assert your new positive and rational beliefs and thoughts. You will be amazed at just how effective this process can be and how quickly it can change how you feel about your life. I encourage you to give it a try and to be patient with yourself and the process. If you need some help with it, I am happy to respond to e-mails.