General Tips for Challenging Cognitive Distortions

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1. **Identify the unhelpful thought**. Ask yourself- Is this an unhelpful false statement? Is it an unhelpful true statement? Is it an unhelpful statement that it is impossible to know whether or not it is true given current understanding?
2. **Identify some alternate helpful thoughts** that you might be able to move the client towards (not shared with the client at this time).
3. Use general open-ended questions to **clarify the statement** and understand what the client means and why.
   a. What did you mean when you said...?
   b. Can you tell me more about what you meant when you said...?
   c. Can you give me an example of why you think this thought is true?
4. If the statement is false, **probe for reasons** that the client thinks the thought might be true.
   a. How do you know that this thought is true?
   b. What's the evidence for this belief?
   c. How did you come to believe that this thought is true?
5. **Explore exceptions** to the unhelpful false thought. (Look for exceptions in the client, in other people, in the past, and possible exceptions in the future)
   a. Are there ever any times this thought is not true?
   b. Are there ever any exceptions to this rule?
6. **Explore other viewpoints**. (You might use "**Best Friend**" or "**Open Chair**" in additional to **Socratic questioning** here).
   a. What would your friends tell you?
   b. What is another thought?
7. **Probe implications** and consequences of having that thought.
   a. How can you find out if what you believe is true? (You might use "**Scientific Experiment**" as a homework assignment here).
   b. Why is talking about this and asking questions important?
8. **Ask questions about questions**.
   a. What does that mean?
   b. Why do you think I asked that question?
9. **Examine the new information** that the client has identified.
10. With false thoughts, **identify a more accurate thought**.
11. Return to the cognitive triangle and **compare the 2 thoughts** for how they make the client feel and what different actions might occur as a result of thinking the new thought.
12. If the original thought is true or partially true or there is no way to know for sure, **identify it as an unhealthy thought** based on how it makes the client feel.
13. **Assess how true** (you might use "**Probabilities,**" "**Responsibility Pie**," "**Lists**," or "**Scientific Experiment**" here).
    a. How likely is this to happen?

b. What other factors or people had to be in place for this to happen?
c. Does this thought look at the whole picture?

14. **Explore alternative healthy thoughts**.
    a. What some another thoughts that are also true?
    b. What would your friends say? (may use role play here)
    c. What would your church or minister tell you?
    d. Looking at the new pie chart, what could you say that is true here?

15. **Identify an alternative thought** that the client is comfortable with here. It doesn't have to be the final healthy thought- gradual change is fine.)

16. Using the Cognitive triangle, **compare the 2 thoughts** for how they make the client feel and what different actions might occur as a result.

17. **Use validation and reflection** frequently as indicated.

18. **Take your time**. Don't jump too quickly to an alternate thought.

19. Once a new thought is identified, **choose a way to reinforce it** during the week (3x5 cards, pairing the thought with a frequent activity, etc.).

(Beck, 2013)