

## 8 Chapter

# Better-But-Believable Thinking

Cognitive therapy was initially developed to treat depression, but it helps substantially with anxiety and other troublesome emotions too. Sometimes emotions are normal, healthy reactions to life's circumstances (see Chapter 11, on acceptance of healthy emotion). When we feel unhealthy levels of anxiety, depression, guilt, frustration, or embarrassment, it's usually because we are thinking negatively. **In fact, we can argue that there are truly no unhealthy emotions, only unhealthy thoughts leading to unnecessary painful emotions.**

Cognitive therapy is a way to systematically change negative thoughts into more healthy thoughts to manage unhealthy emotions. You may have tried positive thinking, and sometimes that can be helpful. However, if it worked very well, you probably wouldn't be reading this right now. The problem with positive thinking is that if you don't believe the positive thoughts are true, they won't be helpful. In fact, some people complain that trying to think positively is an exercise in frustration that can even lead to feeling hopeless. **This is the first problem with cognitive therapy: positive thinking doesn't help if it isn't believable.**

Traditional cognitive therapists begin by asking you to identify negative thoughts that generate depression and anxiety. Next, they expect you to learn several faulty thinking styles and identify what type of error in thinking you are engaging in that is causing that emotion (e.g., catastrophizing, emotional reasoning, or filtering). The next step is to read what you are supposed to do to change this thought in a positive direction by looking at an index with specific instructions for how to combat each thought style. The final step is to construct a new, better thought that will reduce or eliminate your anxiety or depression about the original negative thought. **This is the second problem with cognitive therapy: the number and complexity of the steps involved to reach the better thought means the process is often abandoned due to the time and energy involved to arrive at the new thought.**

**The solution to both problems with cognitive therapy is “better-but-believable thoughts,” or “B<sup>3</sup>s.”** They are called “B<sup>3</sup>s” because each of the three words starts with the letter “B,” and it's catchy! Instead of going through all the preceding steps or reaching for the most positive thought that isn't believable, think of an alternative thought that is *better* than the depressing or anxiety-producing thought, yet believable. For instance, if a teen baseball player is feeling depressed because he struck out twice and made an error, he could think, “Even my favorite major league players have struck out twice and made an error in some games” or “The last game, I hit a double and a homer and made no errors, so I know I can do that again.” Or, if a father is worried about his young son driving, he might think, “Millions of 16-year-olds drive safely every day” or “There's a greater than 99% chance he'll come home safely tonight” or “Worrying won't bring him home safely—I'll postpone my worry to if there is an accident.” B<sup>3</sup>s are meant to be simple. Therefore, most of the time a worksheet isn't necessary. You can just think of B<sup>3</sup>s on the fly. When you are feeling anxious, depressed, or frustrated, note whether you are thinking negatively and, if so, come up with at least one B<sup>3</sup>. The more B<sup>3</sup>s you can create, the greater the likelihood that you'll feel better.

Again, this is a simple technique. However, when a thought is particularly depressing or anxiety-producing or you have a particularly difficult time with a re-occurring negative thought, the following worksheet can be helpful. To improve its effectiveness, have your therapist, a friend, or a family member complete the sheet as well. Because we make better and more complete lists if we work separately, avoid sharing your worksheets until you've come up with as many B<sup>3</sup>s as you can think of individually.

## Better-But-Believable Thoughts (B<sup>3</sup>s)

**Step One**

What are the negative thought(s) that are causing you to feel anxious, depressed, or otherwise distressed?

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**Step Two**

What is the opposite of that thought? Or, what is the most positive thing you can think instead of the negative thought?

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**Step Three**

Brainstorm several other thoughts that are better than your negative thought but more believable than the thought you wrote down under step two. Think of at least five B<sup>3</sup>s about your situation or concern that are better than your negative thoughts but that you believe are true. Be creative! Think outside the box on creative B<sup>3</sup>s rather than staying focused on the opposite.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

**Step Four**

Now read aloud each B<sup>3</sup> from all the lists, paying careful attention to how you feel when you say it. Also consider how helpful you believe it will be as time progresses. Cross off the sentences that aren't helpful.

**Step Five**

Go back and read each one again, rating it on a scale of 2–10, with 2 being only a little helpful and 10 being very helpful.

**Step Six**

Cross off all the B<sup>3</sup>s that have ratings at the lower end of the scale, leaving you with the B<sup>3</sup>s that are the most helpful.

**Step Seven**

Choose two to four B<sup>3</sup>s. In choosing the statements, consider how high their ratings are, but also try to choose ones that will help in a variety of ways. For instance, in the baseball example, if you rated "I've been told I'm a very talented player" as a 7 and "I usually play much better than I did today" as an 8, you might still choose "I really love playing the game" over the first B<sup>3</sup>s, even if you only rated it as a 6, because it is significantly different from the other two examples.

Moving forward, anytime you feel anxious or depressed, assess whether a B<sup>3</sup> might help you feel better. Sometimes it's not even necessary to identify the negative thought. What's more important than identifying a negative thought is whether thinking a good or neutral but believable thought helps you to feel better.

If you use the "Problem-solving" worksheet in Chapter 5, it may be more useful if you add a B<sup>3</sup>s column to that worksheet, as seen on the next page. Write these B<sup>3</sup>s in your devices, on a notecard, or memorize them.

# Problem-Solving

The first two columns of this sheet are the same the Problem-Solving Worksheet on p. 22. You may continue to use that worksheet anytime you are concerned about worry interfering with sleep, studying, etc.

Use this sheet instead when you think that adding B<sup>3</sup>s about your worries may help.

<b>What I'm likely to worry about _____</b>	<b>What I want to do about it before _____*</b>	<b>Better-but-believable thoughts</b>

\* Options for column two are: (1) do something before bed, (2) plan to do something another day (specify when and record it in your calendar), or (3) do nothing.