



Sober Buddha
—Counseling—
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COGNITIVE DISTORTION SEQUENCE

THE LEARNING BENEFIT:

When you learn to overcome the unconscious thinking habits that lead to depression, anxiety and addictive behavior, your brain chemistry begins to normalize, levels of dopamine and happiness increase, you become more optimistic and chances of relapse decrease.

THE FACTS:

In *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders*, (Beck, A., 1989, Penguin Books, London) Dr. Aaron Beck, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and President of the Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, explains how distorted thinking about objective facts leads to depressive and anxious emotions, troublesome physical symptoms and often self-destructive behavior. He further explains that most emotional problems can be solved by taking a more realistic, less emotional look at people, places and things which bother us.

In his work with depressed and suicidal patients, he discovered they invariably exhibited patterns of automatic negative thinking that appeared spontaneously. The patients appeared to see worst-case scenarios in everything, as if they were encoded in the software of their minds. He called these thinking patterns 'negative schemas', which seemed to center around the patients' continual feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and worthlessness. They had low self-esteem, felt nobody loved or cared for them, feared tragedies would occur in the future and often felt life itself was not worth living.

Beck explored the patients' negativity about themselves, others, the future and life in general and would ask them if they could provide factual proof to support their negative position. In other words, could they prove their lives were meaningless and would always be that way? In most cases, the patients could only say they felt that way because things had always gone wrong for them in the past.

Unproductive Focus on the Past

This retroactive, victimized way of thinking is called a past precedent. Most actively addicted people regret the past deeply and their cognitive ability is so distorted by toxic brain chemistry that they cannot manage the kind of creative thinking that sees the possibility of positive change in the future. The past determines the future in their minds. The fact that they have depressed themselves by damaging their midbrain's ability to produce the pleasure hormone dopamine doesn't help the situation.

Downward Arrow

A pattern of distorted thinking called the 'downward arrow sequence' illustrates how negative thinking turns eventually into substance abuse. First, a situation occurs which causes the addicted person stress. Secondly, the addict automatically experiences negative self-talk about his place in the situation. Third, the body reacts with any of a variety of panic-related symptoms. In the fourth stage, the addict automatically thinks of how a drink or a drug would lower the current anxiety. Fifth, the addict experiences more negative self-talk, this time even more personal and devaluing of his worth.

In the sixth stage, the craving to escape anxiety is so high, that the addict hears more automatic self-talk, this time giving him permission to get high. The seventh and final stage in the downward arrow sequence is tragic, but inevitable. The addict gets high and puts himself and others at risk.

Here's how the sequence might look for Tom, who has been asked out to Valentine's Day dinner with his ex-girlfriend Sally, who still has feelings for him.

Of course, in his distorted way of thinking, this invitation is a stressor, not fun.

1. External stressor: Sally's Valentine's Day invitation
2. Neg. auto. thought: "Sally thinks I'll never get clean."
3. Body reaction: Panic, sweating, heart rate increases.
4. Substance thought: "Vicodin always numbs me out."
5. Core self thought: "I don't deserve Sally's love."
6. Permission thought: "If I don't take too many Vicodins, Sally won't notice that I'm high."
7. Behavior: Tom takes three Vicodins before Sally picks him up for dinner and has six more in his pocket. He falls asleep before she arrives and takes 10 minutes to answer the door. Sally naturally gets upset and the evening is ruined.

By automatically assuming the worst about Sally's invitation, Tom doesn't see that she is actually reaching out for him. His body goes into panic mode, and instead of looking toward reconciliation with Sally, he sees only the negativity of the past. He fantasizes about how Vicodin has numbed his unhappiness in the past, completely ignoring the truth about how much pain it has actually caused. Instead of thinking it would be best to avoid the drug, he talks himself into it and proceeds to ruin the night. Anybody looking at Tom's downward arrow sequence objectively, would consider him crazy, but to the addict with distorted cognition, this kind of thinking is perfectly logical.

THE WRITING EXERCISE:

Now you get to practice writing a downward arrow sequence, based on how you imagine an addicted person would think and act in response to an external stressor event. The addict's situation is presented in the following vignette. Fill in the blanks after the vignette.

THE VIGNETTE:

Roger is a 33-year-old alcoholic with two drunk driving convictions and is separated from his wife and two children who refuse to live with him. He has tried repeatedly to get sober with AA, the deterrent drug Antabuse and through individual psychotherapy with a licensed clinical psychologist who has diagnosed him with Major Depressive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Alcohol Dependence. He has never gone to a rehabilitation facility. He dropped out of a Bachelor's Degree program in Environmental Science three years ago because of his drinking.

When his last drunk driving charge was dropped because of missing breathalyser records, he moved from California to Montana to start a new job at Glacier National Park but is frustrated because his pay is so much lower than other employees who have college degrees. He does not have a therapist in Montana, has isolated himself socially and drinks abusively 3-4 days a week.

He has received a letter from the District Attorney of Los Angeles County ordering him to return to LA court within 14 days because his breathalyzer records have been found and his case has been re-opened.

The downward arrow outline below provides you space to write in what you think Roger's distorted thinking would be like. Let your imagination go and write in a worst case scenario. Let the negativity of that scene sink in and then reframe it by reversing his attitude. In the second outline, write in how Roger would think if he were not a victim of his own negative, distorted thinking. Make this scenario as positive and healthy as the distorted scenario was negative.

ROGER'S NEGATIVE DISTORTION SEQUENCE

- a. External stressor: _____
- b. Negative auto thought: _____
- c. Body reaction: _____
- d. Substance thought: _____
- e. Core self thought: _____
- f. Permission thought: _____
- g. Behavior: _____

ROGER'S POSITIVE REFRAME SEQUENCE

- a. External stressor: _____
- b. Negative auto thought: _____
- c. Body reaction: _____
- d. Substance thought: _____
- e. Core self thought: _____
- f. Permission thought: _____
- g. Behavior: _____