

## Identifying Your Problematic Thoughts (Cognitive Coping)

It is important to look at the way you think and feel about problems. The way you think about things can dramatically affect the way you feel and the way you behave. Negative and pessimistic thinking causes troubling emotions. These emotions can make it difficult for you to heal and function in your daily life.

We want to help you learn to identify and change the thoughts that cause your troubling emotions. When you learn to think about negative experiences (such as your child's sexual abuse) in more hopeful and positive ways, you will feel better and be a better model for your child.

Upsetting events often lead to very distressing thoughts. These thoughts are often permanent, pervasive, or too personalized, and are frequently inaccurate and unproductive. Look at your thoughts to see if they have any of these problem qualities.

- ◆ **Permanent:** A permanent thought tells you things will never change. However, there are few things in life that are permanent. Things constantly change.

**Original thought:** "My child will *never* be happy again."

**Replacement thought:** "Actually, I do sometimes see my child laughing and smiling. Maybe with my help my child will be able to enjoy happy times in the future."

**Original thought:** "This will affect every part of my child's life. My child's life is ruined."

**Replacement thought:** "Actually, my child is still doing well in school and still gets along well with friends. I think with

counseling and my help, my child will overcome the problems from the sexual abuse."

- ◆ **Pervasive**: A pervasive thought tells you that something that is true for *one* situation is true for *every* situation. However, most problems are specific, not widespread.

**Original thought**: "I can't trust any man with my child."

**Replacement thought**: "Some men sexually abuse children, but most men do not. Growing up I knew many men who did not sexually abuse me."

- ◆ **Personal**: A personal thought

a) leads you to take **too much responsibility** for things that are not in your control, or

b) leads you to believe that the problem only happens to you.

There are many problems that are not in your control and there are very few problems that only happen to one person or one family.

**Original thought**: "I am a lousy parent because my child was sexually abused."

**Replacement thought**: I am not a lousy parent because my child was sexually abused; sexual abuse is a lousy thing that happens to some kids."

**Original thought**: "I should have known that man was a sex offender."

**Replacement thought:** "Even experts in the field cannot identify an adult who would sexually abuse a child by looking at or talking to them. How can I expect so much of myself?"

If you are still wondering if a thought is problematic, ask yourself these two questions:

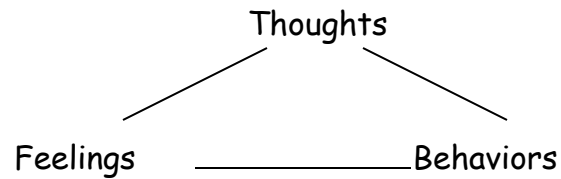
- ◆ "If my best friend's child had a child who was sexually abused, would I say to him or her what I am saying to myself?"
- ◆ "Would I want my child to overhear me making this statement out loud?"

If you would not say this thought to your best friend or in front of your child, then it may be a problematic thought.

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| <b>Homework:</b> |
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| Complete the cognitive coping sheet during this week at times when you feel some distress regarding your child's experience of sexual abuse. List the feelings and thoughts that you experience. Then identify those thoughts that seem to be problematic and try to replace them with more productive, hopeful thoughts that are based on accurate information and evidence. Also, read the information sheet on child sexual abuse, which will provide you with accurate information. |
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What are  
your feelings?

What are  
your thoughts?  
What are you  
saying to yourself

Are your thoughts  
accurate & helpful?  
If not, change them  
to make them more helpful.

What are your  
feelings now?

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**Remember: Dysfunctional thoughts are often inaccurate; they may be too permanent, too personal, and too pervasive.**

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UMDNJ-SOM NJ CARES Institute

Caregiver's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Thoughts

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Feelings

Behaviors

| 1. What are your feelings? | 2. What are your thoughts?<br>What are you saying to yourself? | 3. Are your thoughts accurate and helpful? If not, change them to make them more helpful. | 4. What are your feelings now? |
|----------------------------|--|---|--------------------------------|
| EXAMPLE<br>Guilty          | I should have known he was a sex offender                      | Even child abuse experts can't identify an  | Helpful                        |
|                            |  | offender. The important thing is that I did   | Supportive of my               |
|                            |  | find out and am I'm helping my child.   | child                          |
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**Hint: Dysfunctional thoughts are often inaccurate; they may be too permanent, too personal and too pervasive.**

Child's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Thoughts \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Feelings \_\_\_\_\_

Behaviors \_\_\_\_\_

| 1. What are your feelings? | 2. What are your thoughts?<br>What are you saying to yourself? | 3. Are your thoughts accurate and helpful? If not, change them to make them more helpful.   | 4. What are your feelings now? |
|----------------------------|--|---|--------------------------------|
| EXAMPLE<br>Guilty          | I should have told someone right away                          | Most kids don't tell because they feel afraid, ashamed, embarrassed or were told by the offender not to tell. The important thing is that I told someone and they are helping me deal with what happened. | Relieved, Reassured            |
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**Hint: Dysfunctional thoughts are often inaccurate; they may be too permanent, too personal and too pervasive.**