

**Cognitive Triangle Bucket Sort**  
**Activity for TF-CBT Cognitive Coping Component**

**Brief Description:**

The objective of this activity is to increase the client's understanding of the cognitive triangle and their ability to distinguish among thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This is a good beginning session for the Cognitive Coping component because it provides basic information on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and gives a framework the therapist can use to explore non-trauma-related and trauma-specific situations.

**Materials Needed:**

- ☐ 3 buckets, one labeled Thoughts, one labeled Feelings, and one labeled Behaviors
- ☐ Cards to sort (10 Thought cards, 10 Feeling cards, and 10 Behavior cards) – you can create your own using the following list by printing the document on card stock or laminating a regular piece of paper. You'll need to cut the cards out. You can also edit the document to add to these cards and/or change them to make them more specific to the child you are working with. This may present an opportunity for gradual exposure; you can put a trauma symptom as a behavior, a thought you have heard the child express about the trauma, etc.

**Basic Steps:**

1. Lay the buckets out in a triangle formation in front of the child, with the Thought bucket at the top of the triangle. The buckets can be placed close together or far apart, depending on how much movement you want to incorporate into this activity.
2. Tell the child you'll be teaching them about what thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are and how they relate to each other. Provide basic definitions of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.
3. Ask the child to read each card (or read the card to the child) and then have the child sort the cards into buckets to categorize them. Praise the child during this process.
4. Briefly process the card sort, what you noticed about the child's categorization, etc.
5. Teach the child about how we all have different types of thoughts, some of which are helpful and others which are unhelpful. This section will depend largely on the age and developmental stage that the child is in. The therapist may choose to talk simply about helpful and unhelpful thoughts, or discuss warm/fuzzy and cold/prickly thoughts, accurate and inaccurate thoughts, distorted thoughts, and/or automatic thoughts.
6. Remove the Thought cards from the bucket and then have the child sort them into helpful and unhelpful categories, taking the time to discuss how each thought could be helpful and unhelpful to a child.
7. Keeping the buckets in the triangle formation, begin your first application of the cognitive triangle. Use a non-trauma-related situation and have the child write or draw the thoughts they would have in that situation, then the feelings, then the behaviors. Discuss how the thought impacted the feeling and behaviors, then ask the child to consider whether the original thought is helpful or unhelpful. Create a different thought that could also occur in this same situation and consider how this thought would differentially impact the feelings and behaviors.

## Cognitive Triangle Bucket Sort– Cards to Sort

### THOUGHTS

It's all my fault!

Today is going to be a good day

I should have known better.

I can do this.

I feel stupid, so I must be an idiot.

I tried hard, and my hard work paid off!

This is the worst thing that has ever happened  
to me.

There are lots of great things about my life.

I can't trust anyone.

There are lots of people who want to help me.

### FEELINGS

Sad

Joyful

Excited

Angry

Disappointed

Loved

Brave

Disgust

Nervous

Proud

### BEHAVIORS

Going to school

Helping cook dinner

Doing your homework

Eating with your family

Sweeping the floor

Spilling your milk

Playing soccer

Drawing a picture

Biting your nails

Talking to your friends