Capturing the Seven Column Automatic Thought Record (ATR)

Overview

When we experience grief, difficulty, or are worried, our thoughts can easily get negative and at times negative thoughts can automatically take over and dominate our feelings – about ourselves and about life.

Thought records are one such strategy in addressing negative thinking. Sometimes they help you feel much better quite quickly. At other times, it may take longer for the ‘feel-good factor’ to take effect. Persistence and practice is helpful – partly because you will get much better at doing them over time.

There are many types of thought records and we use the 7 Column Thought Record devised by Dennis Greenberger & Christine Padesky.

Column 1: Situation. Identify the exact moment when bad feeling (s) started to ‘change your mood’. For example, this can happen when a friend fails to show up for a drink, you receive bad news from your boss, do poorly on a test or a close friend forgot to pick you up for work. Events such as these trigger negative thoughts and cause us to spiral downward with our thinking. Acknowledge your situation and add it to this column.

Column 2: Moods. Express your moods / feelings – angry, sad, afraid, depressed, anxious, empty, (are examples), to be placed in this column. Thought records work most effectively when we are able to be succinct in distinguishing our moods following an upsetting event. Rate each mood on a 10 point scale, 1= low to 10= highly charged.

Column 3: Automatic Thoughts. We have thousands of automatic thoughts every day but not all of them are linked to our negative feelings. The aim of the Thought Record is to identify those crude thoughts most closely linked to these bad feelings. We look for the ‘hot thoughts’ and these thoughts are highly charged. It is often helpful to think about what these negative thoughts mean. For example, someone not liking or loving us might mean (in that moment!) that we are unlovable. Not getting a job might mean (in that moment) that we are ‘failures’ or ‘useless’. This would be ‘the hot thought’.

Columns 4: Evidence supporting hot thought. As we suggested earlier, negative thoughts often take over and so may lead us to neglect factors that do not fit with negative thoughts and predictions. We look at the hot thought in column 4 – and ask for evidence to support (any time
in your life span) when you felt that **hot thought**, for instance, feeling like a **failure**, or **unwelcomed** or unloved.

**In this column** - List the times (during your life span) when you felt like a failure or unwelcomed.

**Column 5: Evidence NOT supporting hot thought.** In column 5 we look for evidence that is contrary to feeling like a failure or unloved or whatever hot thought you identified. Thus we ask you to identify (any time in your life span) when you felt successful and positive or needed and appreciated, for example, depending on what your hot thought is.

There are times when the negative mind can operate a kind of ‘security gate’ excluding the more friendly facts. In these two columns try to examine all the factors – good and bad.

**In this column** - List the times (during your life span) when you were or felt successful and appreciated.

**Column 6: Alternative/Balanced Thoughts.** The idea is to now return to your original negative automatic thought/s and to reconsider it/them in the light of all the evidence of Columns 4 and 5. Having considered all the evidence, restate the thought/s in a way that is balanced, that is, taking into account of all the evidence in both columns, not just the negative evidence.

**Rate your belief** in each of these balanced thoughts on a scale of 1 don’t believe to 10 highly believe.

**Column 7: Re-Rate moods.** The final step is to go back to the moods in column 2 and to re-rate them. Perhaps new moods emerged and if so identify them and add to column 7.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITUATION</th>
<th>MOODS</th>
<th>AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS (IMAGES)</th>
<th>EVIDENCE THAT SUPPORTS THE HOT THOUGHT</th>
<th>EVIDENCE THAT DOES NOT SUPPORT THE HOT THOUGHT</th>
<th>ALTERNATIVE- BALANCED THOUGHTS</th>
<th>RE-RATE MOODS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At work, I messed up the deposit at the end of the night.</td>
<td>Frustrated – 8</td>
<td>I’ve done this a thousand times, how did I manage to mess it up tonight?</td>
<td>I am having such a hard time keeping up with all my school work this semester.</td>
<td>I’m so close to having another semester with a 4.0.</td>
<td>Even though I could not finish applying to graduate schools, my parents are still proud of me. - 10</td>
<td>Frustrated – 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angry – 6</td>
<td>I have too much to deal with; I just can’t handle having to count mass amounts of money every night after school and dealing with rude customers.</td>
<td>I could not finish applying to graduate schools this semester; so therefore, I will not start graduate school when I wanted to.</td>
<td>I will make Dean’s List again this semester.</td>
<td>Even though my room is a disaster, it will be worth it because I will make Dean’s List again this semester – 10</td>
<td>Angry – 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upset – 6</td>
<td>I’m obviously stupid, because I can’t count money.</td>
<td>My room is a disaster because I haven’t been able to clean it with how busy I have been.</td>
<td>My parents are really proud of me for everything I have done this semester.</td>
<td>Even though I forgot to contact my doctor when I was home, I called him today and scheduled an appointment -- 10</td>
<td>Upset – 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overwhelmed – 7</td>
<td>I’m incapable of this job.</td>
<td>I forgot to contact my doctor when I was home to schedule more scans and blood work for my health.</td>
<td>I am a godmother to Emily; I try to visit her at least 2x-3x a month.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Overwhelmed – 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxious – 7</td>
<td>I don’t have myself together.</td>
<td></td>
<td>I have been in a relationship with my boyfriend for 2+ years.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Anxious – 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Mind Over Mood by Dennis Greenberger and Christine A. Padesky. © 1995 The Guilford Press