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TIP SHEET: REALISTIC THINKING

6 Steps to Accurate Thoughts

Identify the thought (or thoughts). What exactly are you saying to yourself? If you have a “what if” thought or a question, turn it into a statement.

What if I fail my test because I haven't been studying enough?

Statement --> I will fail my test

Identify alternatives. Are there other outcomes or interpretations?

Alternative 1. I will pass (barely)

Alternative 2. I will get a good grade

Alternative 3. I will get a great grade.

Examine the evidence. What is the probability that your thought is true? (0% = Completely Impossible, 100% = Certainly True)

35% chance I will fail (later revised to 15% after completing steps below)

What evidence do you have that the thought is true?

I failed a test once when I didn't study

What evidence do you have that the thought is false? (Spend extra time on this category; it is much easier to think of the evidence that supports the thought than the evidence that suggests it might not be true)

I have thought I would fail in the past, maybe about 15 times, and I ended up passing. I have done some studying, so that makes it less likely I would fail. I tend to be a good test-taker.

What about the alternatives? What evidence do you have that alternatives may be true or false? What is the likelihood of the alternative(s) being true?

I will pass my test with flying colors (15% likely); I will get an average grade (70%)

Problem solve. Identify any steps to take to reduce the likelihood of the thought being true

I need to prioritize studying, I still have some time to do more. I have been procrastinating.

Suppose the worst thing did happen. What is it? Will you be able to cope? Many people underestimate their ability to cope with the worst outcome.

If I did fail the test, I will probably still pass the class. And even if I did fail the class, it wouldn't be the end of the world. Other people fail classes and go on to have great careers and great lives.

Summarize. What is the most realistic conclusion?

There is probably an 85% chance I will pass, and it will be higher if I study more. If I did happen to fail (which is unlikely), it isn't the end of the world.

Some people can improve their stress level, mood, anxiety, anger level, or other psychological symptoms by working on thinking as accurately as possible about situations that impact their emotions. These strategies don't work for everyone and take a lot of practice. And they rarely work if a person doesn't spend time writing each piece of the exercise (see the example above) That said, many people have benefited significantly from becoming better than the average person at thinking realistically as possible about events and situations.

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