

Automatic Thoughts

Key message:

The cognitive distortions (reasoning bias) or automatic thoughts try to justify and argue daily situations even if they do not fit reality and end up harming our self-concept and way of viewing the world. Apart from emerging at an individual level (our own interpretation of the world), this reasoning bias is a strategy used in extremist speeches to justify the use of violence. To prevent young people from getting radicalised and strengthen the ability of those who adopted an extremist ideology to detect the reasoning bias used by these groups, youngsters must be able to detect the most frequent cognitive distortions and develop coping strategies.

Key words: automatic thoughts, self-regulation, emotional intelligence

Summary: Reality does not reach us in the same way, everyone perceives, interprets and encodes it depending on its schemes, values or patterns. The first thing that we can identify is the emotion: we feel bad and we do not know why; but behind this feeling is a negative thought that has been triggered sometimes without our being aware of it. To know how emotion works and how to identify automatic thoughts which affect self-concept and self-confidence will help us develop strategies to cope with them.

Module	Group size	Group age	Duration
• Exit strategies	• individual • small • medium	• 16 - 19 • 20 - 24	• 30 min • 45 min • 1 hour

Purpose

- To know and detect the three components of emotions that emerge in conflict situations.
- Identify automatic thoughts which affect self-concept, self-confidence and how we perceive the events from our environment.
- To know and practice cognitive strategies to cope with automatic thoughts.

Description

Step 1: Make a brainstorming relating to the concept of emotions. *How would you define emotions? How many kinds of emotions do exist? Would you say that a person can be "affective"? and why? What do you feel when something bad happens to you? And something good? Are these sensations similar in some way?...*

Step 2: Make three columns on the blackboard to present the components of emotion ("I feel... "; "I think... "; "I do... "). Ask for an example of feeling of some upsetting event (e.g. fail exams, to be scold,...) and present the three components of emotion. For example:

I feel...	I think...	and what I do is
anger, my heart is pounding quickly, I'm getting tense, etc.;	that the other person does not understand me;	shouting, insulting and leaving.

Step 3: Present the associated mechanisms to automatic thoughts and the strategies to cope with them (see handouts 1 »List of automatic thoughts and strategies«). It is recommended writing down on the blackboard those mechanisms describing the typical wordings of each of them.

Step 4: (Form small groups) and give them a sheet describing different situations reflecting automatic thoughts (see handouts 2 »List of cases to be analysed«). Ask the participants to identify them and to propose alternatives.

Step 5: Make a pool and think about the difficulty of the task: Did they identified with some automatic thoughts and how did they cope with it. Try to emphasise the fact that these type of thoughts have a distortion effect on our way of viewing the world and that they use to emerge when we are in tense situations.

Materials needed

Blackboard, pen, paper, Handouts 1: »List of automatic thoughts and strategies«; Handouts 2: »List of cases to be analysed« (those lists are orientative).

Methodology

Case analysis and discussion group.

Advice for Trainer

- Adapt the number of mechanisms according to the age and development of the group.
- We recommend to prepare a table with the main mechanisms and strategies to cope with A.T. to be distributed to the participants.
- This activity deals with the second component of emotions (associative thinking). It is advised to carry out previously some dynamic on emotional self-awareness in which emotions and their physical signs will be identified. (first component).

Source / Literature

Adapted from Lázaro P. (1998). Promoviendo la adaptación saludable de nuestros jóvenes. Proyecto de promoción de la salud mental para adolescentes y padres de adolescentes. »Descubriendo pensamientos erróneos«. *Ministerio de Sanidad y Consumo de España*:23. *España*.

Handouts

[Handouts 1: List of automatic thoughts and strategies](#)

[Handouts 2: List of cases to analyse](#)



CC - Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Automatic Thoughts. Retrieved %s, from %sThu January 22, 2026 from
<https://toolbox.ycare.eu/courses/YCARE125/>

<https://www.ycare.eu>

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein