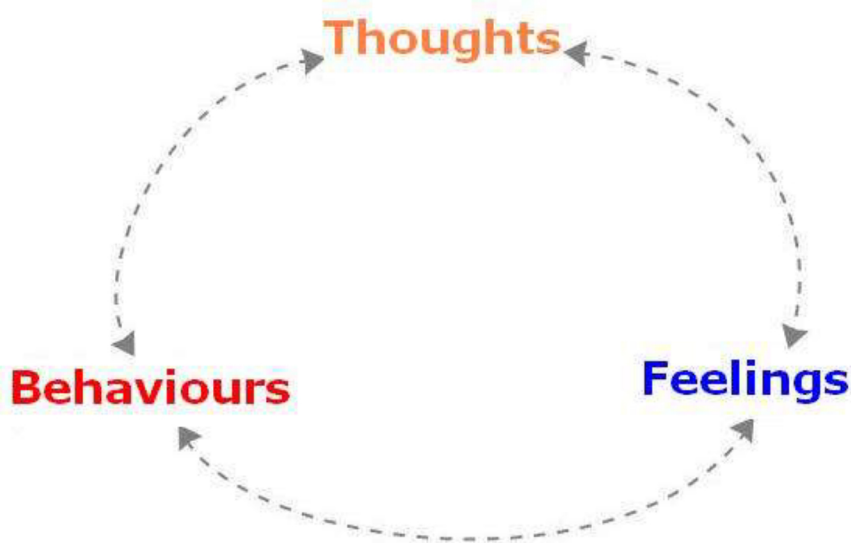


An Introductory Self-Help Course in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

Step Four



Carol Vivyan

2009-2013

Step 4

Making Changes - Thoughts?

When we look at your completed "5 Aspects" sheets from Step 1, how did your thoughts (or images or memories) affect what you felt and what you did? It's easy to think that we can't change the way we think - that thoughts just happen and that we have no control over them. That last bit is certainly true. We cannot stop our thoughts, and we can't control them. Whatever we do, the thoughts are going to happen anyway. But we can choose how we react to them.

Thoughts are generated randomly, automatically, messages from our brain. They are not necessarily true, and not necessarily helpful. We can learn to react to thoughts differently.

Let's use an example from primary school.

The Playground Bully Metaphor



School playgrounds tend to be secured with high fencing to protect the children from outsiders, to stop the children wandering off, and maybe to stop balls being lost. All good things. But it does mean that within this secured playground, all the children have to be together, whether they get on or not. Most if not all primary schools have a playground bully. You know the type. This particular bully is all talk, he (or she) threatens violence, but he just uses name calling, spiteful, horrible nasty stuff. He has a gang of mates around him, who encourage him and join in with him. For the victims of course, it's all very upsetting and humiliating. Or need it be?

The bully laughs and shouts, pointing and humiliating each victim in turn, "You're so stupid" and the like. Maybe much worse. Consider these three victims:



1. **Victim number 1** hears the abuse, becomes upset and runs away crying. How does the bully react? Right - it's great entertainment, what a laugh! It's likely the bully will carry on targeting this young victim.



2. **Victim number 2** hears the bully, thinks about it, then responds with, "Hang on a minute. I got 8 out of 10 in my spelling test this morning, and you only got 4. I'm not stupid!" How does the bully react? Taken aback maybe? They might carry on and have another go, but eventually, the bully will give up on this one.



3. **Victim number 3** hears the bully, looks at him (acknowledges him), doesn't react at all, and just walks away to go and play football with his friends. The bully's reaction? No entertainment to be had here. Might as well give up.

It can be like that with our thoughts. If we imagine our thoughts as our own internal bully, then maybe we have similar options that we can use to respond to our bully.

At the moment, we believe the thoughts (the bully). We're being upset by the thoughts, and reacting to them automatically. The thoughts keep on coming, and we continue to believe and be upset by them. Just like victim number 1.

Victim number 2 challenged the bully - the bully got his facts wrong. Victim number 2 isn't stupid at all; he did better than the bully in the spelling test! We can learn to challenge our thoughts. We can ask ourselves whether the thought is accurate or not - and we can look for hard evidence to check that out, like the spelling test. We'll be learning to challenge thoughts in Step 5 - the next step.

Victim 3 didn't react to the bully at all. He acknowledged him, then walked away, and moved his focus of attention elsewhere. We can learn to do that with our thoughts. Learn to just notice and acknowledge them – “Oh there's that thought again!”, realise that it is just a thought, choose not to believe it, dismiss it and move our attention onto something else. We'll be looking at that in Step 6.

Read the following sheets to learn more about thoughts:

- ❖ **About Automatic Thoughts**
- ❖ **Unhelpful Thinking Habits**

- **Print out the handout, and tick the Unhelpful Thinking Habits that you recognise that you do most often. Use the Finding Alternative Thoughts handout, to help you learn to think differently.**

- ❖ **Finding Alternative Thoughts**
- ❖ **Different Perspectives**

About Automatic Thoughts

Our thoughts are constantly helping us to interpret the world around us, describing what’s happening, and trying to make sense of it by helping us interpret events, sights, sounds, smells, feelings.






Without even realising it, we are interpreting and giving our own meanings to everything happening around us. We might decide that something is pleasant or nasty, good or bad, dangerous or safe.



Because of our previous experiences, our upbringing, our culture, religious beliefs and family values, we may well make very different interpretations and evaluations of situations than someone else. These interpretations and meanings we give events and situations, result in physical and emotional feelings.

Something happens or we notice something, which triggers a thought. Particular types of thoughts tend to lead to particular emotions.

Thoughts	Emotion
I’m in danger and I won’t be able to cope with it	Anxiety, Fear 
I’m being treated unfairly and I won’t stand for it	Anger, Frustration 
Everything is hopeless – I’m totally worthless, no-one likes me, and nothing can change	Depression 

Automatic thoughts...

- ❖ Can be words, an image, a memory, a physical sensation, an imagined sound, or based on ‘intuition’ – a sense of just ‘knowing’
- ❖ Believable – we tend automatically to believe our thoughts, usually not stopping to question their validity. When another driver cuts me up, I might judge that he’s a selfish thoughtless toad, but in fact, he might be taking his wife to hospital as she’s about to give birth. Thoughts are not necessarily true, accurate or helpful.
- ❖ Are automatic. They just happen, popping into your head and you often won’t even notice them.
- ❖ Our thoughts are ours – they can be quite specific to us, perhaps because of our present or past experience, knowledge, values and culture, or just for no good reason at all. Some thoughts are so out of keeping with all those things, and that can make them seem all the more distressing – because we add some meaning about why we had them (I must be a bad person!)
- ❖ Habitual and persistent – our thoughts seem to repeat over and over, and the more they repeat, the more believable they seem, then they set off a whole chain of new related thoughts that lead us to feel worse and worse. They can follow themes, for short periods, or very often, throughout years and decades.

Unhelpful Thinking Habits

Over the years, we tend to get into unhelpful thinking habits such as those described below. We might favour some over others, and there might be some that seem far too familiar. Once you can identify your unhelpful thinking styles, you can start to notice them – they very often occur just before and during distressing situations. Once you can notice them, then that can help you to challenge or distance yourself from those thoughts, and see the situation in a different and more helpful way.



Mental Filter

When we notice only what the filter wants or allows us to notice, and we dismiss anything that doesn't 'fit'. Like looking through dark blinkers or 'gloomy specs', or only catching the negative stuff in our 'kitchen strainers' whilst anything more positive or realistic is dismissed



Judgements

Making evaluations or judgements about events, ourselves, others, or the world, rather than describing what we actually see and have evidence for

Mind-Reading

Assuming we know what others are thinking (usually about us)



Emotional Reasoning

I feel bad so it must be bad! I feel anxious, so I must be in danger



Prediction

Believing we know what's going to happen in the future



Mountains and Molehills

Exaggerating the risk of danger, or the negatives. Minimising the odds of how things are most likely to turn out, or minimising positives

Compare and despair

Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others, and comparing ourselves negatively against them



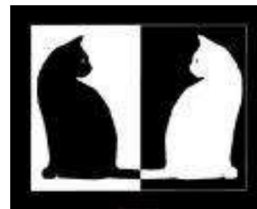
Catastrophising

Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen



Critical self

Putting ourselves down, self-criticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (totally) our responsibility



Black and white thinking

Believing that something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in-between or

'shades of grey'

Shoulds and musts

Thinking or saying 'I should' (or shouldn't) and 'I must' puts pressure on ourselves, and sets up unrealistic expectations















Memories

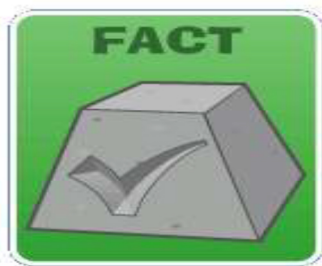
Current situations and events can trigger upsetting memories, leading us to believe that the danger is here and now, rather than in the past, causing us distress right now



Finding Alternative Thoughts

Unhelpful Thinking Habit	Alternative more balanced thought
Mental Filter 	<i>Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Am I filtering out the positives? Am I wearing those 'gloomy specs'? What would be more realistic?</i>
 Mind-Reading	<i>Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Is there another, more balanced way of looking at it?</i>
Prediction 	<i>Am I thinking that I can predict the future? How likely is it that that might really happen?</i>
 Compare & despair	<i>Am I doing that 'compare and despair' thing? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at it?</i>
Critical self 	<i>There I go, that internal bully's at it again. Would most people who really know me say that about me? Is this something that I am totally responsible for?</i>
 Shoulds and musts	<i>Am I putting more pressure on myself, setting up expectations of myself that are almost impossible? What would be more realistic?</i>
Judgements 	<i>I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgements are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?</i>
 Emotional Reasoning	<i>Just because it feels bad, doesn't necessary mean it is bad. My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts – and thoughts are just automatic brain reflexes</i>
Mountains and molehills 	<i>Am I exaggerating the risk of danger, and minimising the evidence that says it's most likely to be okay? Am I exaggerating the negative and minimising the positives? How would someone else see it? What's the bigger picture?</i>
 Catastrophising	<i>OK, thinking that the worst possible thing will definitely happen isn't really helpful right now. What's most likely to happen?</i>
Black and white thinking 	<i>Things aren't either totally white or totally black – there are shades of grey. Where is this on the spectrum?</i>
 Memories	<i>This is just a reminder of the past. That was then, and this is now. Even though this memory makes me <u>feel</u> upset, it's not <u>actually</u> happening again right now.</i>

FACT OR OPINION?



FACT

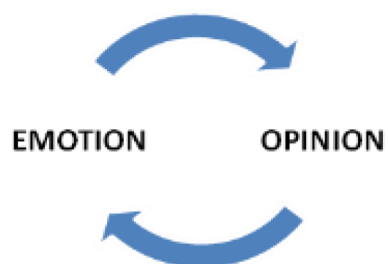
- Evidence to support its truth
- Undisputed
- Driven by rational thought

OPINION

- Based upon a belief or personal view
- Varies according to individuals' knowledge, experience, culture, belief systems etc
- Driven by and reinforced by emotion

At stressful times, we tend to be driven by our emotions and opinions, which create a vicious cycle by fuelling each other. Our emotions strengthen our opinions, which in turn, intensify our emotions.

This leads to impulsive acts and unhelpful longer term consequences, which help to maintain the overall problem.



It can therefore be helpful to ask ourselves whether what we're thinking is FACT or OPINION.

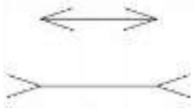
- If it's a fact, then we can make choices about what we can or cannot do.
- If it's an opinion, then we can look at the facts – what we do **know** about the situation.



Realising that many thoughts are opinion rather than fact makes it less likely that we'll be distressed by them, and more able to make wise and calm decisions about what the best action to take.

Get into the habit of asking yourself:

FACT or OPINION?



Different Perspectives



The probably familiar images of two straight lines (of equal length) and a candlestick (or two faces) show us that things are often not as they first seem, and there's almost always a different perspective.



When there's a traffic accident, police ask for witnesses to come forward to describe what happened. They like to have as many witness statements as possible, so they can build up a broader picture and a more realistic version of events. In a traffic

accident, there will be many different perspectives on what happened. The driver will have one perspective, another driver, or a passenger will have yet another perspective. Each onlooker who witnessed the accident will have a slightly different perspective, depending on where they were, how far away they were, how much their view or vision was restricted, how much danger they felt they were in, what else was going on, how the accident affected them, what the accident means to them.



So it's the same principle with everything – each situation, event, conversation means something different to all those involved, and to those not involved. We give different meanings, according to our belief systems, and how we are affected by the event. We all have our own realities.

Anais Nin said: *"We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are"*

We look at situations, events, and interpret what other people say and do, according to our own set of past experiences, culture, faith, values, all of which help us form our beliefs about ourselves, about others, and about the world in general. The meaning we give events, the way we make sense of our world, is based upon our core belief system.

Our minds are constantly trying to make sense of our world, forming judgements and opinions about every situation, event, and interaction. Those judgements and opinions will be affected by our central or core belief system. It is as though we are looking at the world through distorted or coloured lenses – and everyone has their own personal prescription or colour for their glasses.

Core belief system
comprises:

- How I think about myself
- How I think about others
- How I think about the world



Our core belief system is formed and
influenced by:

- Past experiences
- Childhood upbringing
- Culture
- Faith
- Values
- Current circumstances
- Character traits, including genetic influences

Example:**Childhood Experience:**

Bullied and hurt by others

Core Beliefs:

Others will hurt me.
The world is a dangerous place.
I'm useless and unlovable.
I must try to please others so they like and won't hurt me.

Lens: distorted perception

**Situation or Event**

See situations and events as threatening & dangerous

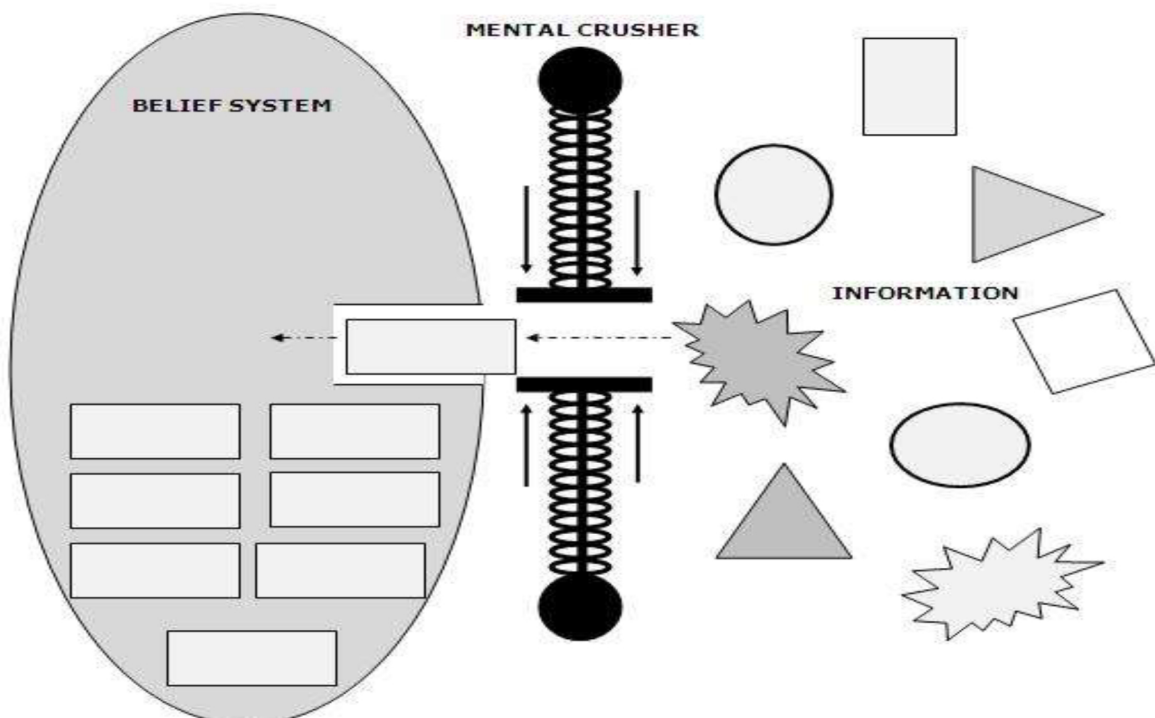
Interpret others words and reactions as critical or threatening.

Behaviour: Passive, go along with what others want, don't talk, avoid eye contact

Emotions: Anxious, depressed, low self-esteem

Thoughts: I'm vulnerable, this is dangerous, I'm going to get hurt.
I'm useless and stupid. No-one likes me.

In the example above, even situations which others find enjoyable and relaxing, this particular person will experience it very differently, and feel threatened by others. A look, word or gesture intended to be friendly and kind, may be interpreted as "They don't mean that. They're only trying to be kind to me because they pity me". Or even, "They mean to hurt me". Their mind is interpreting the situation with the bias of "I'm vulnerable, others might hurt me, this is dangerous, I'm useless and unlovable". The mind will work to make any contrary information, fit with those beliefs. This is shown by "The Mental Crusher"

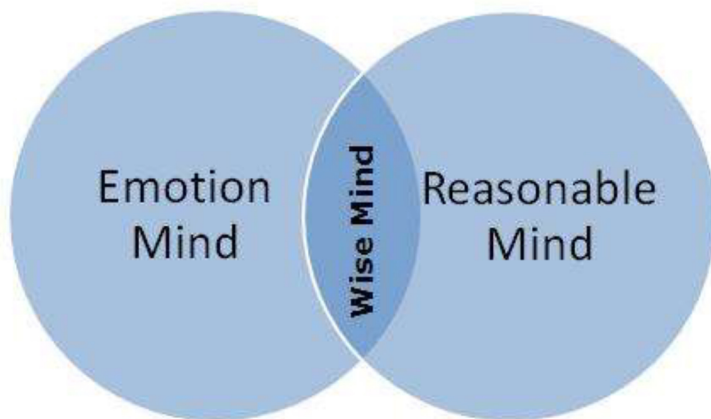


'The Mental Crusher' sits outside the entrance to our belief system, and only allows information or 'evidence' which fits with our own belief system to enter. Any contradictory evidence or information (any shape other than a rectangle) is rejected, or made to fit (crushed into a rectangle). In the diagram, the explosion shape is about to enter the Crusher. As it passes through (shown by the arrow), it becomes a rectangle – it's been crushed and distorted to fit. Therefore, our beliefs remain unchanged in spite of apparently contradictory evidence being out there. *Paraphrased from p. 58 of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Anxiety Disorders by Butler, Fennel & Hackman (Guilford 2008)*

In the case of our earlier example, the information that *a person looked at me*, is "crushed" and distorted ("they looked at me funny") to confirm that others dislike or mean to hurt me.

Learning to see things differently - 'The helicopter view'

Sometimes it's useful to use a metaphor to help us consider the bigger picture. When something is distressing us, we're so close to it, involved with it, part of it – it's really hard to stand back from what's happening. It's like the well-known saying "We can't see the wood for the trees", or like Google Earth – we see the close up view but everything else is hidden from us. We can zoom out our view, and see the bigger picture. We could call this the helicopter view – as the helicopter takes off, getting higher and higher, it sees a bigger picture, and is less involved with the detail at ground level. *(diagram on next page)*

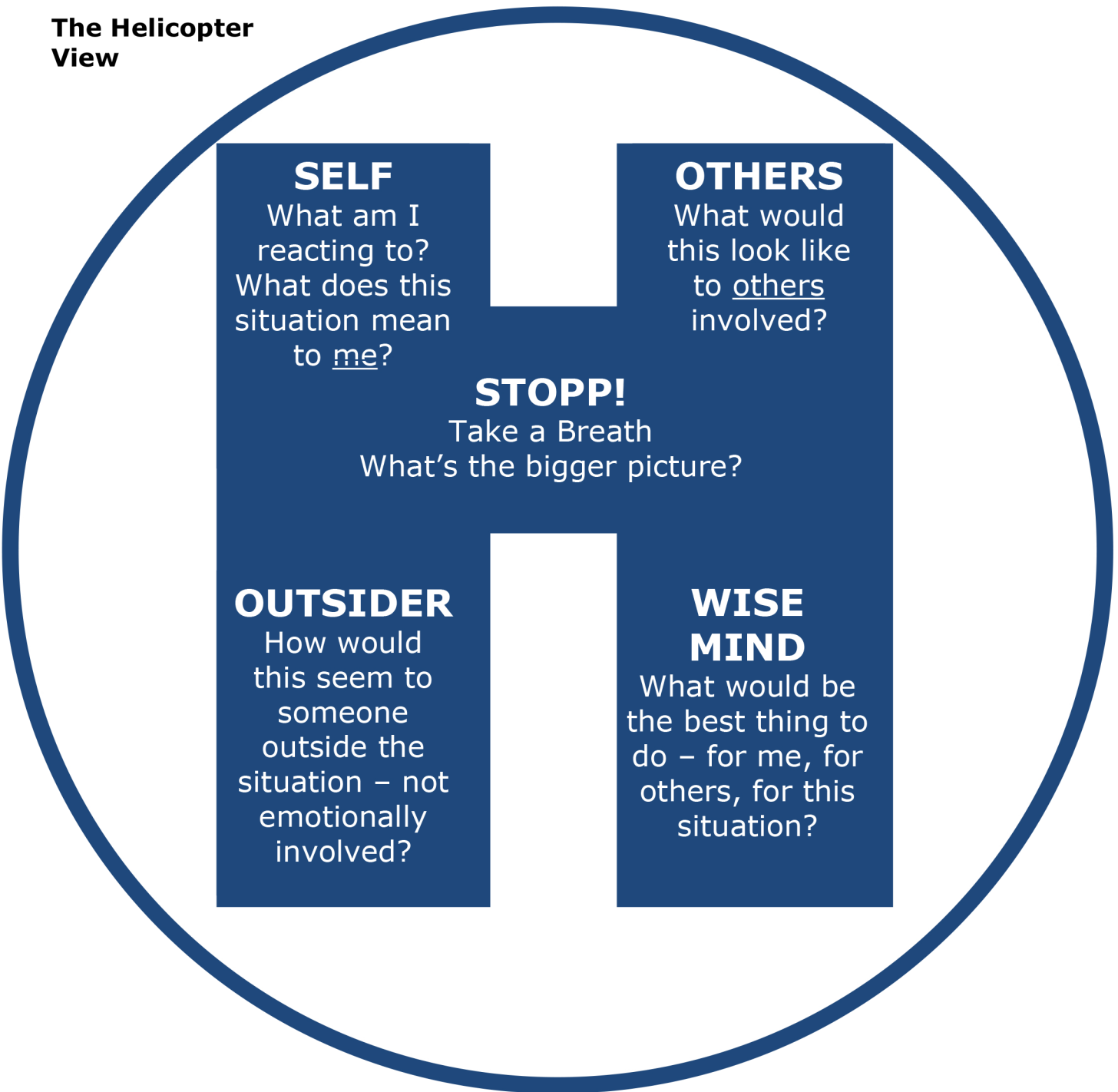


Wise Mind (Linehan 1993) is the balanced part of us that comprises our inner knowledge and intuition, where Emotional Mind (thoughts driven by distressing feelings) and Reasonable Mind (rational thoughts), come together. The part of us that just "knows", that inner truth. Emotion mind drives opinion, whilst reasonable mind is more fact-based. Asking ourselves what 'wise mind' might make of this situation will help us to stand back and be more aware of the

bigger picture, and help us respond in more helpful and effective ways.

Within any meeting of people all the individuals will of course have their own belief system, and will therefore have different perspectives – see and think about things differently - and this will affect the way these individuals interact with each other. We can learn to be more aware of how our own belief system affects us, and consider how others might see the same situation quite differently.

The Helicopter View



Seeing different perspectives will help to reduce distressing emotions, help us feel more confident, enable us to be more understanding and empathic, and improve communication and relationships. As we challenge our unhelpful thoughts and biased perspectives, and see things in a more balanced and realistic way, so we will discover that situations and people can be different to how we usually interpret things, which can lead us to modify our core belief system, and therefore bring about lasting positive change.

STOPP!

In Step 5 we will look more closely at challenging our thoughts and really changing the way we think. We can reprogramme our mind to alter our unhealthy thinking habits, in a way that helps us think more realistically – which will greatly impact the way we feel and react.

If you need help with Step Four, please see this page for individual and personal support from the author, an accredited CBT Therapist:

If printing out the whole self-help course, you can dispose of the Step Four cover page (page 27), and replace this page (38) with the first page (38) of Step Five