

# Dealing with Difficult Emotions using Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

The following is an exercise which can really help us if we suddenly find ourselves overwhelmed with negative emotions, and this approach is often advocated by cognitive behavioural therapists. Some event can happen to us, for example a friend can walk by us in the street without acknowledging us despite our cheery wave, or we feel we have made the best of our appearance at a social event, yet nobody passes any comment. We may feel really upset and as though our buttons have been pressed; there are likely to be feelings of disappointment and confusion.

The first step of this exercise, and I would suggest that the sooner you can do this after the event the better, is to reflect on exactly how you *are* feeling, and to write all these emotions down. For example, with the friend appearing to ignore us we may feel puzzled, hurt, let down and rejected. Even the act of identifying and expressing the emotions in this precise way can be beneficial; some of the heat caused by the situation can dissipate, and help us to become less hi-jacked by our feelings; we create some distance. The next step is to identify the accompanying negative thoughts, and these may be things such as 'What have I done wrong?'; 'Doesn't s/he like me any more?' or 'Why did I bother making an effort?' Again, write these down if you can. These thoughts can literally seem to jump into your head, and are sometimes known as 'automatic negative thoughts' (A.N.Ts.). They make us feel worse still. However, we are not *stuck* with these thoughts and feelings; we *can* change them! We can effectively stamp on our ants!

The final part of the exercise is where we challenge these negative thoughts and emotions, and replace them with positive ones, and they *must* take the form of optimistic reappraisal. Remember, it is all too easy to jump to false conclusions in social situations; we all do it from time to time. It may help to imagine what you would say to a close friend who is in your situation. In the case of being apparently ignored by your friend, you might say to yourself things like 'Perhaps s/he simply didn't see me', or 'S/he was too preoccupied with her/his own thoughts to notice me on this occasion'. With our appearance apparently going un-noticed at the social event, we can tell ourselves things like 'Perhaps we always look nice and that was why there was nothing out of the ordinary to comment on', or 'Maybe people were too concerned and worried about their own appearance to focus on what we looked like'. The more positive challenging statements you can come up with the better, and if you see the exercise through, then you will almost certainly feel uplifted, and able to view what was initially a painful or uncomfortable event in a far more positive and realistic light. The effects can be transformational, lending you both emotional ease, and making you a more compassionate and forgiving person!

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