

SHORT REPORT

**EXPERIENCING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS? WRITE IT
ON PAPER, CRUMPLE IT AND DISCARD IT**

*Yasmin Othman Mydin**, *Syed Hassan Ahmad Al-Mashoor***, *Zul Azlin Razali**

***Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Malaysia; **Discipline of Psychological and Behavioural Medicine, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 68000, Batu Caves, Selangor, Malaysia.**

Abstract

Objective: The present experimental study aims to investigate the effectiveness of behavioural techniques combined with cognitive techniques to reduce the negative thinking. **Method and Result:** The three steps of the behavioural techniques used were such as write the negative thoughts on a paper, then crumple the paper and throw it away. While the cognitive technique is to imagine that the thoughts are being removed from the mind while throwing it away. Nine students participated in this present study. Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ) was used to measure the repetitive negative thinking before and after intervention. Participants completed the questionnaire once before the intervention and after the intervention. The post-intervention result of Wilcoxon Signed-rank test revealed that there was significant reduction ($Z = 2.60, p = .009$) in negative thinking. **Conclusion:** The result indicates that these techniques are effective and can be a quick way to gain relieve from negative thinking. *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry, Vol. 17 (1): January – June 2016: XX XX.*

Keywords: Negative Thinking, Write it, Throw it

Introduction

When individual experiences emotional problems, he or she will harbor negative thoughts as the negative thoughts happen recurrently. Repetitive negative thinking was found to be relevant to emotional problems, it involves thinking about one's problems (current, past, or future) or negative experiences (past or anticipated) [6, 8, 11]. It was found that negative thoughts fell under three categories such as, negative thinking of oneself, about the world and/or one's future [2].

Individuals may struggle to combat their negative thoughts. It can even be distressing to experience these automatic thoughts. However, there are ways to manage these thoughts for a healthier daily function. Abundant studies suggested that Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) was effective to treat various psychological problems. CBT is a

well-structured approach that guides individuals to minimize such thoughts. CBT has various techniques that are systematically applied to gain positive changes in all three components of cognition, behaviour and emotion. Even though there are specific techniques in CBT, there is still considerable chance for therapists to be flexible and creative in developing therapeutic approach [9]. Techniques are selected by the therapists who are relevant to the presenting problems and to achieve goals that the individuals want to achieve.

In the present study, behavioural technique that were used was such as write negative thoughts on paper, then crumple the paper and throw it away. By writing, one can identify what their current beliefs are and the thoughts can be released. Writing can provide a cure just like talking to someone [3]. Additionally, cognitive technique that was applied in the present study was such as cognitive imagery

that was combined with the behavioural techniques. Cognitive imagery technique gives an added therapeutic value. The role of mental imagery is emphasized in CBT [2] as it is beneficial to enhance the intervention to gain better outcomes.

The concept of metaphorical analogies suggests that thoughts can be perceived as physical objects. It was found that when thoughts are physically discarded, they are mentally discarded too [4]. A past study was conducted by [4] used the approach to physically throw away or protect thoughts. It was found that individuals can treat their thoughts as concrete objects. In this study, participants wrote about their either likes or dislikes about their body images. Then, the paper on which they wrote their thoughts was either ripped up or tossed into the trash, or it was kept and checked for errors. It was found that when the participants discarded what they wrote, they mentally discarded them as well, using them less in forming judgments compared to the participants who retained what they wrote.

In the present study, cognitive imagery technique was additionally applied by combining it with the writing and throwing techniques to enhance the outcome. The aim of the present study is to determine the effectiveness of these cognitive behavior techniques to reduce negative thinking.

Methods

Instrument

The Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire

(PTQ) [5] was used to measure the effectiveness of the behavior and cognitive techniques by administering it before and after intervention. The researchers chose this questionnaire for the present study because this scale measures repetitive negative thinking independently of a specific content, and it does not focus on a disorder [7].

This scale consists of 15 items of negative thoughts. The item pool comprised three items for each of the assumed process (five) characteristics of repetitive negative thinking: (1a) repetitive (e.g., “The same thoughts keep going through my mind again and again”), (1b) intrusive (e.g., “Thoughts come to my mind without me wanting them to”), (1c) difficult to disengage from (e.g., “I can’t stop dwelling on them”), (2) unproductive (e.g., “I keep asking myself questions without finding an answer”), (3) capturing mental capacity (e.g. “My thought prevent me from focusing on other things”) [7]. It takes about ten minutes to complete this questionnaire. Reliability Cronbach’s Alpha tested when administered among one of the samples reported by the author was $\alpha = .95$.

Participants

Nine students participated in this experimental study. The students were in the first year of their bachelor degree program. An explanation was given to these students on the objectives of the study, and the procedure involved but the expected outcome was only shared after the session was over. The students participated voluntarily upon receiving informed consent.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Sample size, N	Gender	Age
9	Female	21

Intervention

The intervention was conducted in a conducive room. Papers to write and dustbin were provided in the room. Participants were requested to identify their present recurrent negative thoughts and write it on the paper.

They were given 10 minutes to write down the thoughts. Once the participants completed writing, they were instructed to crumple the papers. As they crumpled the papers, before throwing the paper, the cognitive approach was applied at this stage. The participants were taught to imagine that their thoughts

were removed from their mind while throwing the papers into the dustbin. Upon completing the intervention, participants filled up PTQ once again.

Result

Statistical analysis was done to analyze

whether there was a significant reduction in the negative thinking. Non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to analyze the data. The results revealed that there was a significant difference in the mean score before and after the intervention.

Table 2. Results

Mean Pre-Intervention	Mean Post-Intervention	Wilcoxon Result
6.25	5.89	$Z = 2.60, p = .009$

Comments by students

The students gave a smile after throwing the papers and they commented that, *at the moment, it gives a relief from my negative thoughts*'

'We appreciate the experience and the knowledge we gained can be used at present and in future to minimize negative thoughts'

Discussion

Negative thoughts are commonly experienced when one faces challenges in life. These thoughts may occur spontaneously and repeatedly and may disturb one's functioning in daily life. Some individuals may find difficult to disengage from the negative thinking. Writing helps individuals to identify their thoughts, and the thoughts can be released on a paper. Past study found that writing and throwing the written paper away gives some relief, the individuals who threw away the paper found that they discarded the thoughts from their mind compared to those who kept their writing [4]. In the present study, the researchers tested on writing one's repetitive negative thinking, crumple it and while throwing away imagine that the thoughts are being removed from their mind. The score of self-report questionnaire administered in pre, and post intervention revealed that there was a significant reduction in the negative thinking. This metaphor was instantly apparent, as the participants showed relief through their facial expression with a smile and gave comments that they felt better. This method gives a quick disengagement from

negative thinking. For individuals who experience a busy lifestyle, they may do this conveniently no matter where they are to dismiss their unhealthy thoughts. This may minimize from being overwhelmed with negative thinking that can be distressing.

Nevertheless, these techniques can be beneficial only for a short-term relief of the negative thoughts. The negative thoughts may reoccur. However, when an individual is busy with daily activities, these techniques can be used and gain a temporary relief from negative thinking. As it was found that negative thinking is related to emotional problems, and it involves thinking of one's problems in life [6,8,11], Beck suggested that major events may activate dysfunctional beliefs, and this would then develop negative automatic thoughts about oneself. These thoughts may lead to symptoms of depression, which then reinforce more negative automatic thoughts [1]. It becomes a cycle of negative thoughts or as 'chicken and egg' effect experienced in one's life. For a better functional mental health, individuals are suggested to seek for comprehensive psychotherapy to deal with their problems. Psychotherapy is more effective and beneficial for a longer-term management and reduction of negative thoughts. Minimizing these negative thoughts is beneficial for a healthier functioning.

Acknowledgement

The researchers would like to thank the Year 1 (2014) students to have participated in this study.

References

1. Abela, J.R.Z., & D'Allesandro, D.U. Beck's cognitive theory of depression: The diathesis-stress and causal mediation components. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 2002 41, 111-128.
2. Beck, AT. (1976). *Cognitive therapy and the emotional disorders*. New York: International Universities Press.
3. Borkin S. (2014). *The Power of Writing.: A Therapist's Guide to using Journaling with Clients*. W.W Norton & Company. New York.
4. Briñol P., Gascó1 M., Petty, RE & Horcajo J. 2011. Treating thoughts as material objects can increase or decrease their impact on evaluation. *Psychological Science* 2011;1 :41-47.
5. Ehring T, Zetsche U., Weidacker, K, Wahl, K, Schönfeld,S, Ehlers A. The Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ): Validation of a content-independent measure of repetitive negative thinking. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*. 2011: 42:2.
6. Ehring T., Watkins E.R. Repetitive negative thinking as a transdiagnostic process. *International Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*. 2008;1:192–205.
7. Ehring, T. (2007). Development and validation of a content-independent measure of perseverative thinking . Paper presented at the V World Congress of Behavioural and Cognitive Therapies, Barcel ona,.
8. Segerstrom SC., Stanton AL., Alden LE., Shortridge BE. A multidimensional structure for repetitive thought: What's on your mind, and how, and how much? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2003; 85: 909–921.
9. Tasman, A., Kay, J., & Lieberman, J.A., First, MB. & Riba, M. (2015). *Psychiatry, 2 Volume Set, 4th Edition*. Wiley-Blackwell.
10. Watkins. E. (2006) *Cognitive - Behaviour Therapy for depressive rumination* . Mood Disorders Centre, School of Psychology, University of Exeter.
11. Watkins ER. Constructive and unconstructive repetitive thought. *Psychological Bulletin*. 2008;134: 163–206.

Corresponding author: Dr. Yasmin Othman Mydin, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences University Sains Islam Malaysia, Malaysia.

Email: dryasmin@usim.edu.my

Received: 3 January 2016

Accepted: 8 April 2016