
About Rethinking

✦ **Everyone is thinking, all the time, even when one is not aware of it.** While awake, we are always in a “conversation” with ourselves (sometimes called “self-talk”). It ranges from the trivial (“What should I have for lunch?”) to the profound (“Why should I go on with life?”). Much of this thinking is automatic—it just happens. In rethinking, the idea is to become aware of this internal dialogue and to choose thinking that helps you feel better. For example, saying to yourself, “I’m no good,” would be depressing; saying to yourself, “I’ve had a hard life but that’s not my fault,” might feel a little better.

✦ **Notice how thinking impacts your life.** Thinking affects how you feel and act. For example, imagine that you are home alone at night and drifting off into sleep. Suddenly you hear a sound at the window. If you think, “It’s the wind rustling a tree branch against the window,” you are likely to feel fine and go back to sleep. But if you think, “It’s a robber trying to break in,” you are likely to feel anxious and call the police. The same situation occurs—hearing a sound at the window—but how you feel and act depends on what you *think*.

✦ **Rethinking does not mean “positive thinking”—it means realistic thinking.** For example, if you think, “I’m a bad person,” just flipping this around to “I’m a good person” does not work. The goal is not just to reverse negative thoughts into positive ones, but to evaluate them realistically. Various ways to evaluate your thoughts are described in Handout 2. But it is important to emphasize that rethinking does not mean “the power of positive thinking,” but rather, the power of actually exploring the way you look at the world, the meanings you create, and the realities of your experience.

✦ **Rethinking is a profound emotional experience.** People sometimes believe that “rethinking” is dry, intellectual, boring, or schoolish. When you learn to do it well, it is a deep experience that helps you truly feel better. It is not about repeating to yourself things you don’t really believe, or just saying what you think you ought to say. It is about discovering who you are and choosing how you want to approach your life. Some keys to make it work at this powerful level include the following:

- *Identify “hot” thoughts.* These are thoughts that are connected to your feelings, that matter to you right now.
- *Stay specific.* If you have a general thought such as “My life is hopeless,” try to break it down into what specific and recent real-life experience set off that thought. For example, it might help to identify when you most recently thought this (e.g., yesterday evening when you were home alone) and what it was connected to (e.g., you had been drinking). Then you can work on changing it more easily (e.g., “I notice that I feel more hopeless when I drink,” or “If I spend time with people in the evenings, I might not feel so down”). It takes practice, but it really can help.

✦ **Your thoughts are not wrong or bad.** Some people assume, “If I need to rethink, it means my thoughts are bad.” This is especially true for people with PTSD and substance abuse, who may already feel bad about themselves. But *everyone* has a variety of thoughts, some of which are negative. Remember that there are good reasons why you developed the thoughts you have—they come from your life experiences. For example, if you lived through combat during war, you may have begun to believe that “People are vicious and out for themselves.” Or if you were repeatedly told certain things when you were a child (e.g., “You’ll never amount to anything”), after a while you began to believe it. You may notice too that how you talk to yourself resembles how people in your life have talked to you.

(cont.)

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✦ **Rethinking takes active practice.** Rethinking needs to be learned just like anything else. Remember when you learned to tie your shoes or ride a bike? You had to practice and make mistakes along the way. You can *definitely* learn rethinking—anyone can. It took a long time to develop your current way of thinking, and it may take a while to change it. The more actively you work on it, the better you'll get, and the quicker the results will be. When you notice destructive thinking, *stop yourself* at that moment and ask yourself, "How can I rethink this to feel better?" You need to make this sort of active effort for a while until a healthier way of thinking becomes automatic. It's like building a house: Each brick adds to the strength of the building; it does not happen all at once. Just keep trying!

✦ **Learn more about rethinking.** Browse in a library or bookstore or on the Internet; there are many different resources available under the term "cognitive therapy." For example, there are books by Aaron T. Beck, the main founder of cognitive therapy. Also, David Burns's *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* is an inexpensive, popular paperback. Call the Institute for Cognitive Therapy to locate a cognitive therapist in your area (610-664-3020).

✦ **Try SMART Recovery or Rational Recovery.** SMART Recovery and Rational Recovery are substance abuse self-help groups like AA, except that they focus on rethinking, do not have a spiritual component, and do not view addiction as a lifelong disease.

Acknowledgments: Cognitive therapy was originally developed by Aaron T. Beck, MD, and Albert Ellis, PhD. The substance abuse section of Handout 1 is based in part on Beck and colleagues (1993) and DuWors (1992). The idea of listing rethinking methods in Handout 2 is based on Burns (1990), and the handout contains two methods taken directly from that book. Ask your therapist for guidance if you would like to locate any of these sources.