
Rethinking Tools

Try the following tools to change your thinking.

*** List Your Options ***

In any situation, you have choices, and it helps to identify them. For example, David was living with his parents and feeling “pathetic, like a loser.” Instead of continuing to put himself down, he sat down and made a list of what he could do: (1) Go to job counseling, get a job, and earn money to move out; (2) See if I can live with a friend; (3) Apply for disability and move out; (4) Stay with my parents but spend more time on my own. He began to see that he had choices and that it was up to him to decide among them, rather than just feeling bad about the situation.

*** Notice the Source ***

Who’s telling you something? Can this person be believed? What are that person’s flaws? This strategy is especially important when you are being criticized or given advice that you disagree with. For example, Judy’s aunt kept telling her she was fat. Judy would get depressed and eat more, until she began to see that being talked to like that was “not okay—it was disrespectful.” She began to see that her aunt was a very unhappy person who took out her pain on the people around her.

*** Imagine ***

Create a mental picture that helps you feel better. For example, Allan imagined his “heart exploding” when he had a panic attack, and this would make him feel more anxious. He changed the image to his heart as a “computer,” hard-wired and solid—computers don’t just blow up and explode. You can create any image you want, as long as you can picture it: Imagine yourself as a coach encouraging yourself, or an explorer embarking on a search, or an artist playing with possibilities. You can also use your imagination to “invent a possible world”—imagine how you want the future to be, and then move toward that (as in sports training, when an athlete imagines a move before doing it).

*** Praise Yourself ***

Notice what you did right. Decades of research show that the most powerful method of growth is positive reinforcement. This is the opposite of “beating yourself up” or “putting yourself down”—neither of which works to make you better. Find every opportunity for praise, no matter how small. And be generous—there’s no such thing as overdoing it when it’s well earned.

*** Learn from Experience ***

Find a meaningful lesson that can help you next time. For example, Doug asked his roommate to take his marijuana plants out of the house, but the roommate refused. The lesson he learned was, “My roommate is not really there for me. I need to either move out or find a new roommate who is less selfish and won’t drag down my recovery.”

(cont.)

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* **Create a New Story** *

Tell "what happened" in a way that is respectful of yourself. For example, Jennifer used to think of herself as "damaged goods." Eventually she rewrote the story: "Now I think of myself as a walking miracle, and feel a sense of esteem when I realize how far I've come, and how I'm really a good and decent human being."

* **Think of the Consequences** *

Evaluate the pros and cons over the long term. You feel like having a hit of cocaine. It may feel great for 15 minutes. But in the long term? You've wasted money; your body will feel worn out; you may dislike yourself more; your family may be disappointed.

* **Examine the Evidence** *

Like a scientist or detective, strive to look at the facts objectively. Notice both sides, pro and con. For example, Jack said, "I can't get off drugs." To examine the evidence, he wrote down two lists, *Pro* (e.g., "I've been using marijuana every day for 3 months") and *Con* (e.g., "I was able to quit for 6 months 4 years ago"). Notice that the lists include only facts, not opinions. When Jack looked at the lists, he realized that he had had some past success with recovery and felt a little more motivated to try again.

* **Brainstorm** *

Try to think of as many interpretations of a negative situation as possible. For example, if someone cuts you off in driving, you could leap to "What a jerk! No one cares about anyone else." Or you could generate other interpretations: "Maybe he just found out his wife has gone into labor," "Maybe he's a doctor rushing to the hospital to do surgery." This strategy is especially important for situations where *you don't know the truth and can't find out*. In this situation, you can't stop the other person's car and ask why you were cut off on the road. In short, if you can't know for sure, you might as well go with an interpretation that makes you feel better.

* **What's the Real Impact?** *

Sometimes it helps to ask, "What is the real impact on my life?" If you apply for a job and don't get it, you may feel depressed and say to yourself, "I'm incompetent; I really blew the interview. This is terrible." But if you ask yourself, "What is the real impact?", you might think "That was just one interview. There are many jobs out there, and I can keep applying, or maybe get new training, job counseling, practice interviewing, or read a book on how to get a job. This is not the end of the world." In fact, most situations are not life-or-death.

* **Make a Decision** *

If you're stuck, try just picking an imperfect road (as long as it's safe). Sometimes people get caught up in so many possibilities or the attempt to find a "perfect" solution that they feel paralyzed, stuck, or confused. When you get this way, it's actually better just to go ahead and make a decision for now, even though it may not be perfect. Down the line you can reevaluate your decision, but for now, "Do something, anything" (as long as it's safe!) is better than feeling paralyzed and doing nothing.

(cont.)

* **Remember a Better Time** *

Get perspective by noticing good times. Sometimes when you're caught in a negative feeling, it seems as though it has always been this way in the past and will always be this way in the future. Try to remember better times (e.g., "Last month I was able to keep myself from bingeing on food for an entire week," or "Three years ago I was able to hold a job"). Both PTSD and substance abuse are disorders that may be different at different times. Stacy wrote, "I used to be Stacy, full of life and vigor, and smart. Now I don't know me. Will I come out of this? I am a good person, and the 'old me' wants back in. Can the 'old me' live with how I act when I'm sick? I have to remember it's not me now, it's an illness."

* **Discover Rules to Live By** *

Identify principles that keep you focused on recovery—for example, "Take good care of myself," or "When in doubt, do what's hardest."
