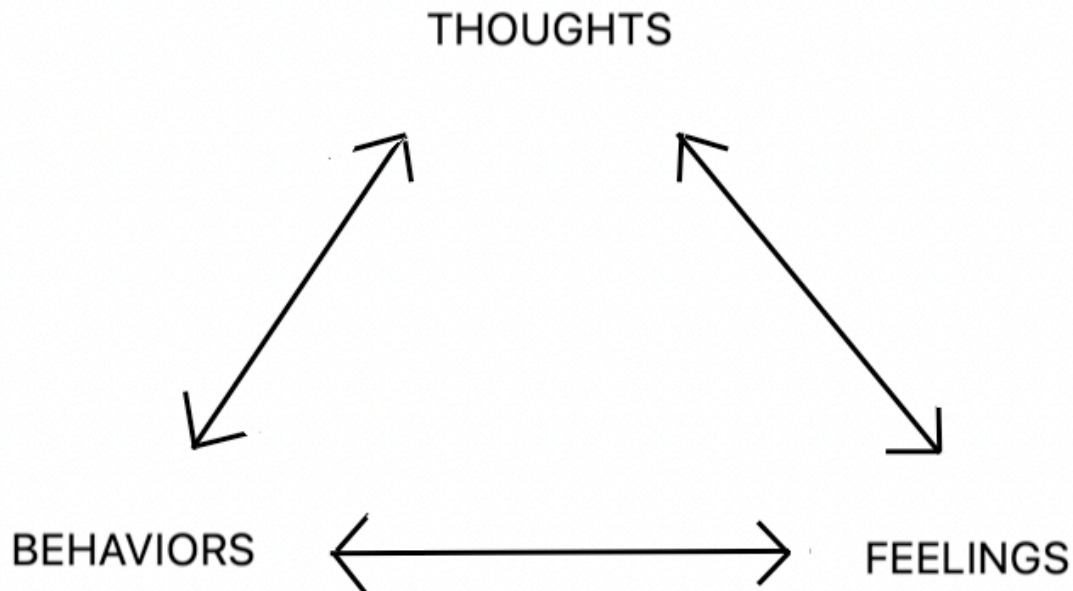


ANXIETY THOUGHT PATTERN FORM PROTOCOL

You are the person you have to deal with the most in life, every day, all day long. And the two things you have to deal with the most is your thoughts and your feelings, both of which produce your behavior. Having solid insight into this dynamic is critical to have a basic understanding of how people function and is particularly important for each of us to apply to our lives on a daily basis, especially regarding problems, issues, goals, and healthy living in general. My Anxiety Thought Pattern form is a great tool to help people be consciously aware of these processes in order to maximize coping with anxiety in a productive manner. First, we will look at the Cognitive Triangle.

COGNITIVE TRIANGLE

Below is a diagram for the Cognitive Triangle, which represents the interplay between our thoughts, feelings and behaviors that represents the basic ways we respond to stimuli:



As you can see, there is a reciprocal relationship between the triad of thoughts, feelings and behaviors as each of them influences the others. While this diagram helps clarify these dynamics, the reality can sometimes seem more like the Bermuda Triangle due to the competing and conflicting factors occurring within our minds and mysterious and powerful subconscious machinations below the surface. That being said, it is still a practical protocol to help improve how consciously we are living life.

Below is a linear representation of the Cognitive Triangle:

EVENTS THOUGHTS FEELINGS BEHAVIOR EVENTS

In my mind, it gets a little sticky sometimes in terms of what is actually being triggered: Is it our conscious or subconscious? Is it deep-rooted programming from childhood or a present and accurate sense of unfairness? Is an expectation or assumption being triggered? In situations of low stress, I can see the conscious mind being most active. In situations of moderate stress, I can see the subconscious being most active. In situations of severe stress, I can see our more highly reactive lizard brains being most active because they are ancient and more primitive operating systems. Figuring out the source of a trigger is an interesting exercise, and if we are curious, honest and diligent enough we can probably figure it out because our programming is pretty basic stuff - survival, whether physical or psychological, is always the priority one way or another. "Why do I feel threatened?" is a good question to ask ourselves on a regular basis.

ANXIETY THOUGHT PATTERN FORM

I adapted the Cognitive Triangle format for my Anxiety Thought Pattern Form but added the results of our behavior and how satisfied we are with the results (as I learned to do from my mentor in grad school, Jack Nowicki):

EVENTS	THOUGHTS	FEELINGS	ACTION	RESULTS	SATISFACTION
Dropped a tray	Everyone thinks I'm a klutz	Embarrassed	Ran away	Felt humiliated	2

In this scenario, the person accidentally dropped a tray, made an assumption everybody was judging him negatively, fed into his reactionary emotionality which became exaggerated, tried to avoid the situation by running away, running away only compounded his feelings of humiliation and provided more ammunition for hostile peers, resulting in a poor outcome for himself, which is unfortunate because his behavior was unintentional, and nobody else was hurt. Being able to process an event like this appropriately requires the development and nurturing of self-awareness and self-acceptance, most of which comes through self-talk post facto first. Going over numerous examples helps the patient be more aware of these dynamics on a conscious level and, after ongoing review of this process, integrate a higher level of self-awareness in the moment.

My Anxiety Thought Pattern Form exercise has been consistently illuminating for patients. My instructions are simple:

- Bring in five to eight examples as five allows enough for the patterns and themes to present themselves, and more than eight would make it hard to review all of the examples in one session.
- It is essential to write down these experiences promptly, in good detail and honestly to capture them as vividly as possible, that way I can provide insightful feedback and give specific recommendations to improve how to manage your thoughts, feelings and behavior more effectively.

When I analyze this form with patients, I look for:

- Themes and Patterns in the events that trigger anxiety
- Themes in terms of self-consciousness, self-doubt, catastrophic thinking, perfectionism, etc.
- Patterns in how my patients respond with their thoughts, feelings and actions
- Results for my patient and, from my patient's perspective, the others involved
- Satisfaction in terms of how well they judged their results on a 0-to-10 scale, with 0 = a nightmare and 10 = everything worked out great or I did the best I possibly could have under the circumstances (the latter is especially important for people to recognize)

Grading the results is very important for three reasons:

- It quantifies the outcomes of our thought/feeling/behavior dominos into practical terms

- Quantifying, in turn, allows a qualifying of not only the results but also how accurately the patient characterizes the results, including how others reacted and how my patient interprets their reactions. Patients will often underscore how well things played out, and, as a therapist, I question their seemingly low number, and sometimes they are able to justify the low number but most of the time, I need to encourage them to see the outcomes as better than they are interpreting them.
- All of which helps elucidate whether my patients are reinforcing a negative or positive feedback loop with themselves.

The results are also important because they influence our self-esteem on an ongoing basis, and our self-esteem significantly affects how we interact with the rest of the world. The flow of my Anxiety Thought Pattern Form is really the basic nuts and bolts of the process that guides every choice we make in life.

There is also the opportunity for a deeper dive into awareness:

- Parsing typical vs atypical anxiety vs free-floating anxiety vs dirty anxiety
- Examining the underlying source of a patient's anxiety (e.g., physiological, experiential, lifestyle, insecurity or cognitive dissonance, or a combination thereof) and their respective origins
- How common and normal the dynamics, factors and origins of anxiety are in general, and whether a patient is moving forward (fight), retreating (flight) or becoming stuck (freeze).

It's pretty amazing what you can cover with one sheet of paper and fifty focused minutes. There are other forms I have seen that are more involved, but I greatly prefer this form for its simplicity which allows these and patterns to announce themselves more organically.

Once patients have the basic awareness of and insight into these dynamics, it makes a huge difference in terms of them feeling capable and confident in addressing their anxiety more effectively on a regular basis. Protocol necessitates patients fill out a second form for the next session to see how well they are able to apply their newfound self-awareness, which usually results in a marked improvement and cementing of comfort and confidence. A third review can be helpful. Replacing faulty or old beliefs with more reasonable and effective beliefs can be challenging but it is very possible and liberating.

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