

The
Thinking Person's
STRESS Management
WORKBOOK

DO NOT DUPLICATE



The **Thinking** Person's S T R E S S **Management** W O R K B O O K

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Cognitive Restructuring & Stress Management

Most stress management programs focus on physical techniques for reducing stress like meditation, exercise and progressive muscle relaxation. This workbook will guide you through a proven method to manage stress called *cognitive restructuring*. Cognitive restructuring helps you reduce stress by showing you how your thinking contributes to every stressful event you experience.

Physical techniques reduce stress.

Physical approaches to stress management attempt to dampen or reduce your body's responses to threats and other stressors. In contrast, cognitive restructuring can prevent stress. It is utilized during a stressful event and does not have any physical effect on the body. It simply teaches you how to change your *thinking* when stressful situations arise. Cognitive stress management is *proactive* while physical stress management is often used *retroactively*.

Physical techniques take time.

Physical techniques for reducing stress require time spent practicing the technique. Meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, biofeedback, yoga and exercise all require a daily commitment of time to help you manage your stress.

Cognitive restructuring requires no extra time at all. Once you master it, you simply use it whenever you need it. You don't have to set aside time each day to practice it.

Since time pressure is a major source of stress, having a technique in your tool kit for managing stress that requires no extra time obviously provides a distinct advantage.

This article is not meant to discourage you from the practice of physical stress management techniques. In fact, these techniques are excellent for erasing the buildup of stress. Still, it's important for you to know that, for many reasons, cognitive techniques are sometimes more practical especially when you want to manage your stress *while it's happening*.

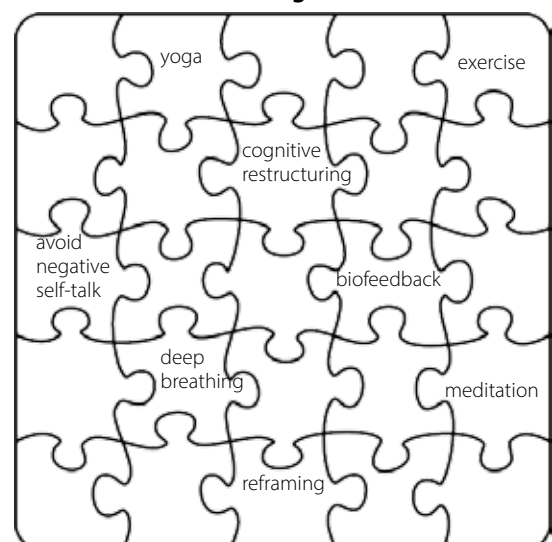
Cognitive restructuring is perfect for work.

Since cognitive restructuring is a *thinking* technique, no one knows you are using it but you. You certainly can't stop to meditate if your boss is getting on your nerves, but you can practice cognitive restructuring. And this workbook will show you how. This is why cognitive restructuring may be the perfect tool for managing stress at work.

According to a study published on The National Institute Of Health's Website (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17615474>), cognitive restructuring was determined to be the "most effective" workplace stress management technique. Because cognitive restructuring allows you to manage stress on the fly, it prevents stress from bothering you in the first place. And as a result, it will make you more resilient and better able to handle a wide variety of challenges, without getting frustrated, bogged down, annoyed or angry.

As you glance through this workbook you'll notice that every article has a corresponding exercise on the facing page. Completing these exercises will help give you hands-on experience in the use of various cognitive restructuring techniques. For your first exercise you're going to learn the difference between the terms stress and stressors. This exercise is important because the practice of cognitive restructuring relies heavily on your ability to break down a stressful event into its component parts, two of which are represented by stress and stressors.

The Stress Management Puzzle



Listing Your Stress and Stressors...

Stressors are the triggering events and circumstances that cause you to feel stressed. (A flat tire, a traffic jam, a demanding boss, etc.) Stress is what you often feel after you've come in contact with a stressor (anxious, tense, upset). It's also how your body reacts (headaches, muscle tension, stomach upsets, etc.) It's important to know the difference between stress and stressors because (as you will soon see) stressors don't automatically cause stress. In the columns below, describe five stressful episodes you have encountered in the last few days.

Stressors

In this column, describe the events, thoughts, and interactions that caused you to feel stressed.

I got caught in a traffic jam before an important meeting.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Stress

In this column, describe how the event made you feel: angry, sad, frustrated, annoyed, etc. Also note any associated stress symptoms: headaches, muscle tension, stomach upsets, coming down with a cold, etc.

I felt upset and tense. I could feel a headache coming on.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Notice any patterns in your list of stressors? Is your stress occurring mostly at work, with a certain person or during a particular activity like driving or waiting in line? Show this list to a friend or spouse. Try to find something on the list of stressors that doesn't bother him or her. Identifying these discrepancies will help you see how cognitive restructuring works: If a stressor doesn't bother him or her, why does it have to bother you?

How Do You *Think* About Stress?

If you're like most people, you blame events and circumstances for your stress - never realizing that it's your thoughts and beliefs about these events that are the true source of your stress. If this sounds hard to believe, please read the following example.

Let's say a person has \$1,000 invested in the stock market. One morning she decides to sell her stock and notices her investment is down \$20. No big deal, she thinks.

That afternoon she goes out to lunch at a restaurant. She hands the waiter a 50 dollar bill for a \$15 lunch. She puts the change in her coat pocket without counting it. When she gets back to work and moves the money to her purse, she realizes she's \$20 short. She's not sure if she lost the money or the waiter shortchanged her, but either way she's upset.

The stimulus in these two events is exactly the same...she lost \$20. But her interpretation is different. Thus, the first event has virtually no effect while the second event leaves her feeling rather upset.

The main difference between the two events is what she thought about them. In the stock market example, she thought: *"\$20 down is not so bad, it could have been much worse; I understood the risk I was taking when I invested the money."*

In the second example, she's quite upset: *"Perhaps the waiter did it on purpose- or the restaurant cashier - how outrageous,"* she thinks! *"Or maybe I just lost the \$20 when I reached into my pocket for my keys in the parking lot."* As she ponders the possibility that she made a "stupid mistake" she says to herself: *"What an idiot I am!"*

Her thinking about the second event is entirely different even though *the net loss is exactly the same!* Believe it or not, this kind of thinking occurs in just about every stressful event you encounter. Your thoughts about an event are often the *cause* of your stress. This may seem like bad news, but it's also good news - *depending on the way you think about it.* If you can create stress in your own mind, you can eliminate it there, too.

Most of us think like the woman did in the second example: Berating ourselves for innocent mistakes

and often seeing a situation like this in the worst possible light. But we can also teach ourselves to see things more clearly and more rationally. For example, we could say to ourselves: *"It could have been much worse, everyone loses money now and then. And if the waiter did it, I'm sure it was an honest mistake. This event will remind me to always count my change."*

The next time you feel stressed, notice your thoughts. See what's going on inside your head. Try to determine whether your thinking is contributing to your stress. During stressful events your mind fills with all kinds of distorted thoughts such as: *Why does this always happen to me? Or, this is the worst thing that could have happened. Or, I must be a bad person because I let this happen.* These are all examples of cognitive distortions which are more commonly known as negative self-talk. In the next exercise you'll be asked to monitor your self-talk.



"That waiter knew I wouldn't count my change carefully. He probably cheats, people like that all the time. I'm never going back there again!"

Monitoring Your Self-Talk

When you say things to yourself like "I hate myself; I'm lousy at everything; I'm a terrible parent; My boss is a total jerk; Life is so unfair; I can't stand waiting a minute longer; He shouldn't have done that; This job is impossible;" these are all examples of negative self-talk. In order to practice cognitive restructuring you need to become aware of your self-talk. The next time something stressful occurs, listen to your self-talk and jot down a record of what happens in the columns below.

Stressful Event

My boss asked me to work late on Friday.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Associated Thoughts

"Why does he always ask ME? I'm such a pushover."

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

DO NOT DUPLICATE

The ABC's of Cognitive Restructuring

If you were on your way to work, and a major traffic jam caused you to be two hours late, how would you feel? Stressed? Of course. And if you're like most people, you'd blame your stress on the traffic or some other outside force beyond your control. But in fact, your stress was mostly the result of your *thoughts* about the event, not the event itself.

Imagine for a moment, what your thoughts would have been as you sat in that traffic jam: "Why does this stuff *always* happen to me? I'm such an *idiot* for not checking the traffic report before I left for work. This is the *worst* thing that could have possibly happened."

If that's similar to what you would have thought in this situation you are certainly not alone. Just about everybody thinks this way. But **you** need to realize it's your thinking that is causing your stress. And you have the power to change your thoughts through the use of cognitive restructuring.

Cognitive restructuring (CR) can give you the tools you need to dispute negative, stress-inducing thoughts at the precise moment they occur. In the above example CR would encourage you to *restructure* your thoughts by saying to yourself: "This stuff doesn't *always* happen to me. In fact, it hasn't happened in several months. If it happened more often I *would* have checked that traffic report. This is nowhere near the *worst* thing that could have happened."

Once you learn to dispute your irrational thinking and faulty logic, through the use of cognitive restructuring, you begin to substitute accurate, objective thoughts at the moment you feel the most stressed.

The next time you get stuck in traffic, you might tell yourself: "This happens to everyone. It's no big deal. Chances are, this traffic jam will clear quickly.

But if it doesn't I'll pull over and call my boss and let her know what's happening."

Psychologist, Albert Ellis came up with a simple way of summarizing the cognitive restructuring process using the equation: **A+B=C**. In this equation **A** stands for the **Activating event**. **B** stands for your **Beliefs** about the event and **C** stands for the **Consequence** of A+B.

So in the previous example, the Activating event, or **A** is the traffic jam. **B** is your belief that this is the worst thing that could have happened. **C** is what you feel when you combine **A+B**. In this case the consequence was that you felt frustrated and upset. But if you change your thinking at **B** you can change the outcome or consequence of this event.

So if you *believe* that getting stuck in traffic is the worst thing that could have happened to you, the consequence of A+B is going to be a LOT of *stress*. But, if you *believe* that you can deal with this situation by making a phone call, your C is going to be entirely different. In other words, your stress



is going to be *much* less.

So while you might not be able to control events and circumstances, like traffic jams, you can control your reaction to them by controlling your thoughts and beliefs. That's what cognitive restructuring is all about.

The exercise on the next page will help you identify your ABC's.

Knowing Your ABC's

During the next 7 days, analyze how **Activating events** (for example, a missed deadline) plus your thoughts and **Beliefs** about those events (for example, *this is the worst possible thing that could have happened*) can add up to stressful **Consequences** (for example, anger, frustration and tension). Any time you experience stress during the course of the next week, try to isolate the activating event and notate it in column A. Then try to determine what your thoughts were at that time and notate them in column B. And finally, record what you felt as the result of A+B in the column C.

A

Activating events. What was it that started you feeling stressed?

I got a \$100 speeding ticket for going 12mph over the speed limit.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

B

Beliefs. What were you saying to yourself before, during and after a stressful event?

What an idiot I am. Why can't the cops catch real criminals? It's not fair!

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

C

Consequences. How did you feel at the conclusion of the stressful event?

Angry, frustrated, neck muscles tense.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

In looking over your list of A's, B's & C's can you think of any thoughts you might have substituted in column B that would have resulted in a less stressful outcome in column C?

When Learning Your ABC's, Don't Forget D for Dispute

In Dr. Albert Ellis' equation $A+B=C$ (which we discussed on page 6) **A stands for the Activating Event**. That's the cause of stress - a flat tire, a broken appliance, or an angry boss. These are all A's or *Activating events*.

B stands for Beliefs. What you think about the flat tire and the broken appliance or the angry boss represent your *beliefs* or your interpretation of what has taken place.

C stands for the Consequence. How you feel and what happens to you physically (i.e., a stiff neck or a tension headache) and emotionally (i.e., anger, fear, frustration, sadness) is the *consequence* of $A+B$.

This equation helps you understand how your beliefs about events - not the events themselves - are the true source of your stress. During an activating event your thinking tends to be distorted: "This flat tire is going to ruin my whole day," or, "This appliance is going to cost a fortune to fix," or, "My boss is going to kill me when she discovers the mistake I've made." In these examples your *Beliefs* are exaggerated and faulty. You're doing what Dr. Ellis calls *awfulizing*. You're assuming that the worst possible scenario is the *only* possible scenario. While sometimes the worst thing does happen, *most of the time it doesn't*. Why put yourself through all that misery every single time, when the worst possible scenario rarely comes to pass?

That's where the letter "D" can help. You need to Dispute statements that simply aren't true or are hardly ever true:

A flat tire is not going to ruin your *whole* day. A broken appliance isn't *automatically* going to cost a fortune and your boss certainly isn't going to *kill* you. Flat tires are relatively easy to repair, bosses don't always expect you to be perfect, and sometimes you can fix an appliance yourself with the help of the troubleshooting guide in the back of your owners' manual. When you dispute your distorted thoughts you immediately lower your stress, you start to think of solutions and most importantly, you change the **Consequence of $A+B$** . You'll be astounded by how effective this one simple idea can be when it comes to preventing and eliminating stress.

So when learning your ABC's, don't forget the letter **D** for **Dispute**.



Disputing Your Distorted Thinking

Distorted thinking is a major cause of stress. However, you can learn to dispute your own distorted thoughts, and thereby lower your stress. Stress is often a signal that your thinking may be muddled, irrational or confused. In the left column below jot down the examples you've already written in column B on page 7. In the right column attempt to argue, dispute, reality test, or think more objectively about what you wrote in the Faulty Beliefs column. If you need ideas for how to dispute your faulty beliefs see page 10 for assistance.

Faulty Beliefs

It was unfair of the cop to single me out for a traffic ticket. I was an idiot for not slowing down more quickly.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Rational Counter Arguments

Yes, other people were going faster, but life isn't always fair and I was speeding. I made a mistake. I'll be more careful next time.

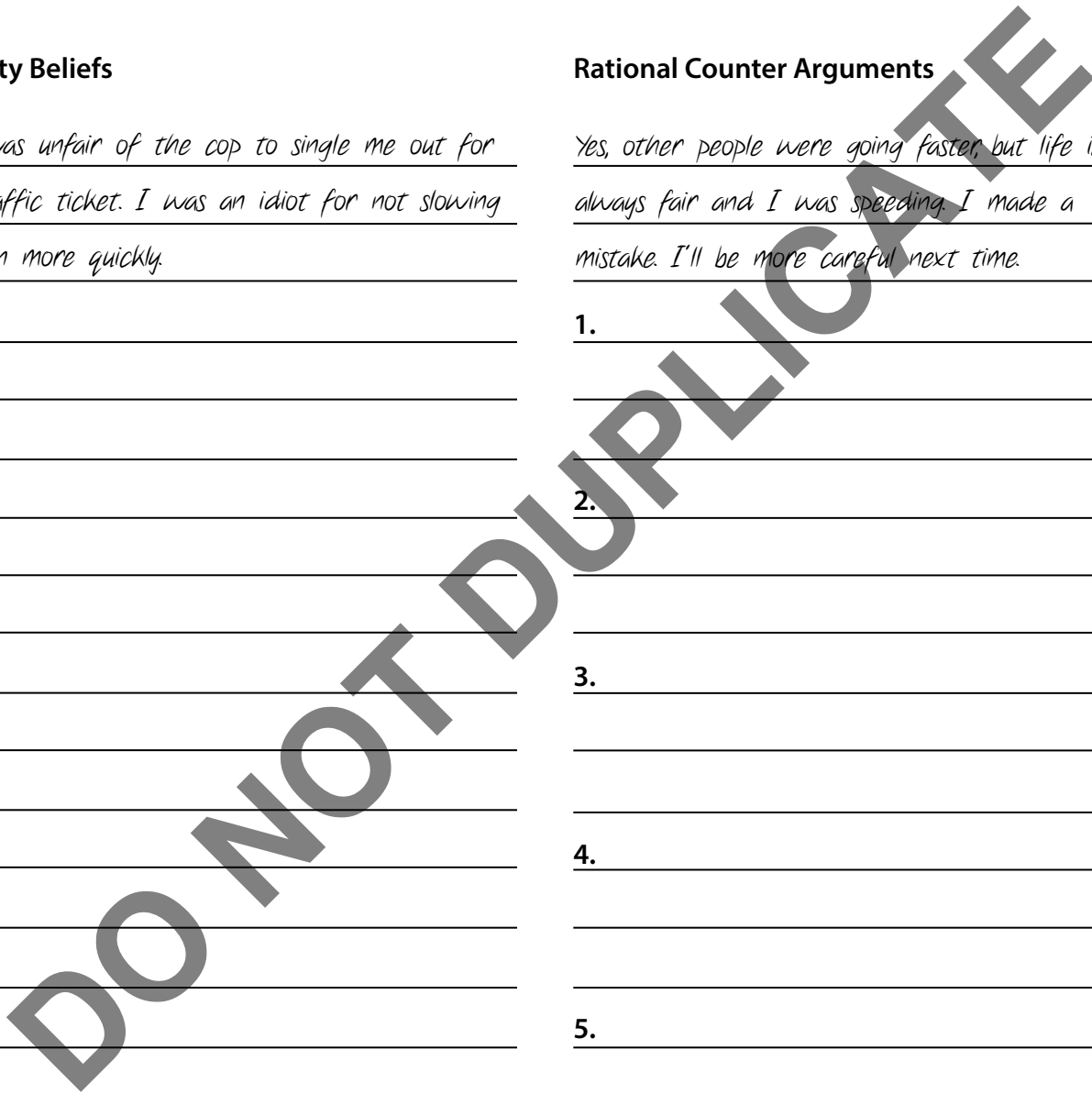
1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____



12 Irrational Things We Say to Ourselves and How to Dispute Them

1. "I can't stand this."

Dispute: I already have.

2. "This is the worst thing that could have happened."

Dispute: If it *really* was the worst thing that could have happened I wouldn't be standing here right now.

3. "I'm such an idiot for letting that happen."

Dispute: I made a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes.

4. "I'll never learn to use this _____."

Dispute: I've learned to use other things that were just as difficult and I can learn to use this one, too.

5. "Why does this stuff always happen to me?"

Dispute: This stuff happens to everybody, not just me.

6. "He *never* returns my calls."

Dispute: It always takes longer than I would like, but eventually he *does* return my calls.

7. "My neighbors are completely inconsiderate."

Dispute: My neighbors probably don't realize how much this bothers me.

8. "Nobody cares about this issue but me."

Dispute: Of course other people care about this issue; I just need to seek them out.

9. "Life seems so unfair to me."

Dispute: Life isn't always fair and it's foolish to expect that it would be, but sometimes I am fortunate, too.

10. "I'm a terrible parent."

Dispute: I could have handled this situation better. The next time it comes up I'll be better prepared.

11. "If I let someone else do this it won't get done right. I must do it myself!"

Dispute: I can't do everything. I'll let someone else do it and it doesn't have to be perfect.

12. "My boss is the world's worst."

Dispute: I wish my boss treated me better, but he certainly isn't the world's worst. In fact my last boss had his bad moments, too.



More Practice Disputing

Fill in the blanks below to customize an *irrational belief* and your *rational dispute*. In the first example, you might fill in the blanks as follows: *My Boss* is a total idiot because he *always asks me for things at the last minute*. Your rational dispute might be: *My Boss* isn't all bad. After all, he did *give me plenty of warning on that job he gave me the other day*. Try to make your rational dispute as accurate and objective as possible.

1. Irrational belief about a boss or coworker: _____ is a total idiot because he/she _____

Rational Dispute: _____ isn't all bad. After all, he/she did _____

2. Irrational belief about your own skills: I wish I was better at _____
_____, but I've always been lousy at that.

Rational Dispute: I *could* be better at _____, but I would have to:

3. Irrational belief about a spouse, friend, or family member: My _____ is the absolute worst.

Rational Dispute: My _____ has done some pretty good things too. They are: _____

4. Irrational belief about a vendor or a friend: _____ never returns my calls.

Rational Dispute: _____ takes longer than I would like to return my calls. Perhaps I could get him/her to act more promptly by: _____

5. Irrational belief about a situation: _____ is unfair. I can't stand it when life is unfair.

Rational Dispute: Sometimes life isn't fair. But I have been lucky too. Like when I: _____

6. Irrational belief about a recent event: This _____ is just awful. It's never going to work out right.

Rational Dispute: This _____ seems awful right now, but in time it won't seem nearly as terrible as it does today.