A 50-minute thought record group

A facilitator guide for one 50-minute session on thoughts, feelings, and thought records. Use it with the 50-minute handout.

What the session is for

Members learn how a situation, a thought, and a feeling connect, practice on a made-up situation, and catch a hot thought of their own. The aim isn't positive thinking. It's for each member to see a thought as something they can look at instead of something they just believe.

What you'll need

- The 50-minute handout for each member, four pages, and a pen.
- A whiteboard or flip chart.

The session at a glance

MINUTES	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
0 to 5	**Welcome and norms**	A check-in, then the norms.
5 to 12	**Thoughts and feelings**	How they connect, and the example on page 1.
12 to 27	**A made-up situation**	The group works through it together.
27 to 42	**One of your own**	Each member catches a hot thought.
42 to 50	**Discussion and close**	What it was like, and finishing it later.

Welcome and norms, 0 to 5 minutes

Ask for a word about how each person is arriving, with passing allowed. Then set the norms out loud.

- **Nobody has to share.** Passing counts as full participation. Someone can do the whole record silently and still get a great deal out of it.
- **Nobody argues with anyone else's thought.** Each member weighs their own evidence. The group can offer questions, never verdicts.
- **No rescuing.** When someone shares a painful thought, the urge is to tell them it isn't true. Hold it. Ask a question instead.
- **What's said here stays here.** Say it anyway, since thoughts can get personal. Be clear about the limits, too. You can't promise what other members will repeat, and you'll need to act if someone's safety is at risk.

Two ways in. Nobody has to show their page. In discussion, members can talk about the process, like what it was like to find the hot thought, without saying what it was. The made-up situation gives everyone a way to practice without disclosing anything.

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Thoughts and feelings, 5 to 12 minutes

SAY "The same situation can feel very different depending on what we tell ourselves about it. If a friend doesn't text back, 'She's busy' and 'She's tired of me' lead to very different feelings. Most of the time those thoughts go by too fast to notice. A thought record slows the moment down, so you can look at the thought instead of just believing it."

Walk through the example on page 1, one step at a time.

A made-up situation, 12 to 27 minutes

The made-up situation. Read Marcus's story aloud. Ask for the moment a camera would have caught, how he might have felt, and what went through his mind, including the picture in his head. List the thoughts on the board and pick the hot thought together. Then sort the details into evidence for, evidence against, and things that only feel like evidence, and write a balanced thought. Practicing on someone imaginary makes it easier to do with your own.

A key for Marcus. Likely answers, though others can fit. Let the group get there first.

- **The situation and feelings.** In his car outside the office at 5:30, about to leave. Anxious, embarrassed, lonely, then maybe relief once he cancels.
- **Thoughts and images.** "I'll have nothing to say." "I'll make it awkward for Dev." "They barely remember me." The picture of himself at the end of the table.
- **A likely hot thought.** "Nobody there wants me around."
- **Evidence for.** He only knows Dev well. Two people needed reminding of his name last time.
- **Feels like evidence but isn't.** The mistake at work, feeling drained, the picture in his head, and leaving early last time, which says more about how he felt than about them.
- **Evidence against.** Sam talked with him last time and asked about him this time. Dev wrote "We missed you" and suggested lunch. Dev made the plans the last three times.
- **A balanced thought.** "I only know Dev well, and two people forgot my name last time, so it makes sense I'm nervous. But Dev keeps reaching out and Sam asked about me. At least some of them want me there."

Weighing it and balancing it. Evidence means facts anyone who was there could confirm. Be fair to the hot thought first. If members get stuck, offer "What would you tell a friend?" or "Is there another way to see this?" A balanced thought isn't the opposite of the hot thought or a positive slogan. It takes both lists into account, often with "even though" or "and."

One of your own, 27 to 42 minutes

Members pick a recent moment when their mood shifted, one that matters but isn't the hardest thing in their life right now, and fill in page 3 as far as the hot thought. The most common mix-up is feelings and thoughts. A feeling is usually one word, and anything that takes a sentence, like "I feel like a failure," is a thought.

SAY "Of all the thoughts that went through your mind, which one hits hardest? Which one, if it were true, would explain why you felt the way you did? That's the hot thought. Rate how much you believe it, from 0 to 100."

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Discussion and close, 42 to 50 minutes

QUESTIONS

- What was it like to find the hot thought?
- What did you notice when you looked at the evidence?
- What was it like to slow the moment down?

Members finish the record later, on pages 3 and 4, at home or in the next session.

SAY "One last thing. You don't have to win an argument with your thoughts. Just catching one and writing it down already puts a little space between you and it. That space is where the work happens."

What to watch for

- **Thoughts in the feelings column.** Catch it early and gently. It's the most common mix-up.
- **The group debating a thought.** If members pile on to prove someone's thought wrong, slow down and hand it back: "What do you make of the evidence?"
- **When the thought is true.** Sometimes the evidence supports it. Don't talk the member out of it. Move to what they can do about it.
- **Records turning into reassurance.** Repeated records about the same fear can become reassurance seeking, especially in OCD and health anxiety. Note it, and consider whether individual work fits better.
- **Thoughts that don't belong here.** Steer away from records about a traumatic memory or about harming oneself. Those belong in individual work with a clinician.
- **Safety concerns.** If a member mentions suicide or self-harm, or it shows up on a page, respond calmly, don't explore the details in the group, check in with them privately right after, and follow your setting's risk procedures. In the US, 988 is available by call or text at any time.

Notes by setting

- **Inpatient units.** Use situations from the unit, or the made-up one. Keep each record short and finish it in the session. Don't depend on homework, and expect members to come and go.
- **Intensive outpatient and partial hospital programs.** When sessions are a day apart, one short record between sessions is plenty.
- **Substance use treatment.** Thoughts that come before cravings or use, like "I can't get through this without it," are useful material. Keep records away from detailed descriptions of use.
- **Outpatient groups.** Members have time to do records between sessions, so reviewing them carries more weight here.

Sources

Thought records go back to A. T. Beck and colleagues, Cognitive Therapy of Depression, 1979, and have been taught and published in many versions since. The thinking styles draw on Beck's work and on D. D. Burns, Feeling Good, 1980, and use the names in the Thought Record app. The forms in these handouts were written for Everyday Insight.

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