A 90-minute thought record group

A facilitator guide for one 90-minute session on thoughts, feelings, and thought records. Use it with the 90-minute handout.

What the session is for

Members learn how a situation, a thought, and a feeling connect, practice on a made-up situation, learn common thinking styles, and work through a full thought record of their own with a partner's help. The aim is a thought that fits the facts better, not a positive one.

What you'll need

- The 90-minute handout for each member, five pages, and a pen.
- A whiteboard or flip chart.

The session at a glance

MINUTES	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
0 to 10	**Welcome and norms**	A check-in, then the norms.
10 to 18	**Thoughts and feelings**	How they connect, and the example on page 1.
18 to 33	**A made-up situation**	The group works through it together.
33 to 45	**Thinking styles**	Matching example thoughts to styles.
45 to 57	**One of your own**	Each member catches a hot thought.
57 to 70	**Pairs with the question list**	Weighing the evidence with a partner.
70 to 80	**A balanced thought**	Writing it and rating again.
80 to 90	**Discussion and close**	What changed, and the closing words.

Welcome and norms, 0 to 10 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, 10 to 18 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, 18 to 33 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."

Thinking styles, 33 to 45 minutes

Thinking styles. Walk through the list on the handout briefly, then have members match the six example thoughts to styles, alone or in pairs. Many thoughts fit more than one. Likely answers, though others can fit, in order: all-or-nothing thinking or mental filter, mind reading, overgeneralizing or fortune telling, emotional reasoning, discounting the positive, and should and must statements. The point isn't the label. Naming the pattern makes a thought easier to question.

One of your own, 45 to 57 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 4. 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. For finding the hot thought, use the words under Facilitator moves.

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Pairs with the question list, 57 to 70 minutes

Pairs with the question list. One person reads their hot thought, or Marcus's if they'd rather keep theirs private. Anyone can work alone instead. The partner asks questions from the list, one at a time, and doesn't answer them or argue. Then they switch. Four or five minutes each.

Weighing the evidence. Evidence means facts, the things anyone who was there could confirm, not guesses about what other people were thinking. Be fair to the hot thought first, then look for what doesn't fit. The question list on the handout helps when members get stuck.

A balanced thought, 70 to 80 minutes

A balanced thought. It isn't the opposite of the hot thought and it isn't a positive slogan. It takes both lists into account, often with "even though" or "and." When the evidence mostly supports the hot thought, it says what's true and what the member can do about it. Then members rate the feelings and the hot thought again. Even a small drop counts.

Discussion and close, 80 to 90 minutes

QUESTIONS

- What was it like to find the hot thought?
- What did you notice when you looked at the evidence?
- How does the balanced thought sit with you?
- Did the feeling change at all?

SAY "One last thing. You don't have to win an argument with your thoughts. Catching one, looking at the evidence, and finding something a little more balanced is the whole skill. It gets faster with practice."

Facilitator moves

How you respond matters more than which questions you pick. These four moves cover most of it.

1. Separate the thought from the feeling

When someone says "I feel like nobody cares," ask what emotion came with it. The answer might be sad, lonely, or hurt. Then put "nobody cares" in the thoughts column.

2. Find the hot 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."

3. Ask, don't argue

Questions help members weigh the evidence themselves. Arguments make them defend the thought. "What would you tell a friend?" works better than "That's not true."

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4. Aim for balanced, not positive

A balanced thought the member believes at 60 beats a positive one they believe at 10. If the new thought sounds like a slogan, ask how much they believe it.

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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