A four-session thought record group

A facilitator guide for four sessions on thoughts, feelings, and thought records, of 50 or 90 minutes each. Each session has its own handout.

What the series is for

Over four sessions, members learn to catch the thought behind a shift in mood, weigh the evidence, write a balanced thought, and handle the places people usually get stuck. Thought records are built up in stages, the way they're usually taught, rather than handed over whole.

How the sessions fit together

SESSION	FOCUS	WHAT HAPPENS
Session 1	**Catching the thought**	How thoughts and feelings connect, a made-up situation, and a hot thought of their own.
Session 2	**Weighing the evidence**	Thinking styles, and evidence for and against.
Session 3	**A balanced thought**	Writing it, rating again, and one full record at home.
Session 4	**Practice and getting unstuck**	Reviewing a record, what to do when stuck, and a look back.

Each session stands on its own. Open every one with a two-minute recap of the steps so far, so anyone who missed a session can take part. A newcomer can work from the made-up situation.

What you'll need

- That session's handout for each member. Session 1 is three pages, session 3 is one, and sessions 2 and 4 are two each.
- At the end of session 3, a blank Thought Record for each member, printed from mythoughtrecord.com.
- Each session builds on the last, so ask members to keep their handouts, or collect them and hand them back.
- A whiteboard or flip chart.

Norms, every session

Set them out loud at the start of each session, in full the first time and briefly after that.

- **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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Session 1: Catching the thought

50 MIN	90 MIN	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
5	10	**Welcome and norms**	A check-in, then the norms in full.
8	12	**Thoughts and feelings**	How they connect, and the example.
12	20	**A made-up situation**	Thoughts, feelings, and the hot thought.
15	25	**One of your own**	Each member catches a hot thought.
Skip	13	**Discussion**	What it was like.
10	10	**Noticing and close**	A log of moments before next time.

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."

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. In session 1, stop there. In 90-minute sessions, the group comes back to Marcus in session 3. 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."

Feelings versus thoughts. Feelings are usually one word, like sad, anxious, angry, or ashamed. If it needs a sentence, like "I feel like a failure," it's a thought. This is the most common mix-up, so name it early.

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."

Noticing this week. Members log a few moments when their mood shifted on page 3, with how strong the feeling was and what went through their mind. They don't have to change anything yet.

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Session 2: Weighing the evidence

50 MIN	90 MIN	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
8	10	**Recap and check-in**	What members noticed in their logs.
10	20	**Thinking styles**	Matching example thoughts to styles.
8	15	**A thought from the week**	One hot thought, rated.
16	30	**Weighing it**	Evidence for and against, then pairs with the question list.
8	15	**Discussion and close**	What the evidence showed.

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.

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.

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. In 50 minutes, members use the questions on their own.

QUESTIONS FOR SESSION 2

- Which thinking styles showed up in your log?
- What was easier to find, evidence for or against?
- Which question helped most?

Session 3: A balanced thought

50 MIN	90 MIN	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
8	10	**Recap and check-in**	Where members left off.
8	15	**Picking up**	The hot thought and the strongest evidence.
Skip	15	**A worked example**	The group writes a balanced thought for Marcus.
20	30	**A balanced thought**	Writing it and rating again.
14	20	**Discussion and close**	What changed, and one full record at home.

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.

A worked example, in 90 minutes. Go back to Marcus. Sort the details into evidence for, evidence against, and things that only feel like evidence, using the key in session 1. Then write several balanced thoughts on the board. Ask the group to rate how believable each one is, and talk about why the positive slogans score lowest.

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QUESTIONS FOR SESSION 3

- How does the balanced thought sit with you?
- Did the feeling change at all?
- What's the difference between a balanced thought and a positive one?

Session 4: Practice and getting unstuck

50 MIN	90 MIN	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
12	20	**The record I did**	What went well and where members got stuck.
14	25	**When you get stuck**	Three common snags and what to try.
14	25	**Looking back**	What members learned and what they'll keep doing.
10	20	**Closing round**	One thing each person is taking with them.

When you get stuck. Walk through the three snags on page 1. When the evidence supports the thought, move to what's true and what the member can do about it. When a thought keeps coming back, a defusion exercise from ACT can help: the member writes it as "I'm having the thought that…" and notices it without debating it. When the feeling doesn't change much, remind members that feelings often shift slowly and a small drop counts.

QUESTIONS FOR SESSION 4

- Where did you get stuck?
- Which thinking styles do you notice most in yourself?
- What do you want to keep doing after the group ends?

SAY "One last thing. The group ends today, but the skill doesn't. Hot thoughts will keep showing up. You don't have to catch every one. Catching some, and looking at them for a minute, is enough to loosen their grip."

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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