

#16



Practicing Aspiration

Practicing Aspiration can help us identify thoughts that are rooted in shame and gently reframe those thoughts through a lens of kindness and self-compassion.



Each Saprea Support Group meeting begins with 'Group Leader A' reading the script while participants follow along. The script will be the same for every group meeting. **To find the script, visit saprea.org/support-groups.** Below are the additional meeting materials for this course.



To watch the intro video for this lesson, scan the QR code or go to <https://vimeo.com/showcase/10293739>.

Group Activity

CHALLENGING COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS



Note to Group Leader: If you are short on time and would like to modify this activity, you can invite participants to select one of the Challenge Questions to answer during the "Explore" section.

Part of Aspiration is directing our thoughts towards healing. This may seem difficult at times, especially when our thoughts take mental shortcuts that reflect—and fuel—certain beliefs about ourselves.

Everyone's thought processes take mental shortcuts from time to time. For example, you may predict the length of your commute based on what traffic was like yesterday. Sometimes, however, these shortcuts are unhelpful and do not reflect reality. A cognitive distortion is a mental shortcut our minds take that is rooted in feelings of shame, judgment, or self-blame. Such shame-based shortcuts are especially common among survivors of child sexual abuse. Cognitive distortions (sometimes referred to as "thinking errors") often reinforce the shame that we are already feeling, rather than providing a different, more compassionate perspective.

An example of a shame-based shortcut might be:

Situation: You have a headache.

Thought: *"I am so incapable of coping with life that even the smallest things give me a headache. I shouldn't even try to function as an adult."*

Cognitive Distortions Commonly Experienced by Child Sexual Abuse Survivors

Recognizing the mental shortcuts you take can help you evaluate if they are helpful or not. Here are five types of cognitive distortions that survivors of child sexual abuse commonly experience.

Thinking in Extremes

This includes seeing things in black-and-white terms, with no in between, as well as exaggerating our idea of what is happening.

- “It’s impossible for me to connect with anyone.”
- “I’m always alone, and I never get to do things with friends.”

Stuck in a Single Event

Taking one instance and expecting all current and future situations to be similar to that single instance.

- “It was really difficult to share my story, and the person I just disclosed my abuse to responded cruelly. I shouldn’t tell anyone about my abuse because they will have the same reaction.”

Filtering Out the Positive

Acknowledging positive experiences but then rejecting them as meaningless or exceptional.

- “I didn’t experience any setbacks today, but that’s probably just a fluke.”
- “I received good feedback on my project, but it’s only because they didn’t read it closely enough to see all my mistakes.”

Jumping to Conclusions

Making assumptions about the future or about what other people are thinking based on your current emotions, past experiences, or small bits of information.

- “My friend hasn’t been supportive in the past, so she probably won’t be supportive in the future.”
- “Others see me as damaged.”

Making It Personal

Assigning blame to yourself or assuming the situation hinges on your actions rather than other circumstances.

- “She seemed upset. It must be something I said.”
- “They changed that policy. It was probably because I was late two months ago.”

ACTIVITY STEPS

This activity will provide a sample script with an example of an unhelpful thought, challenging questions that can help you analyze it, and possible answers to those questions. Work to come up with instances of cognitive distortions from your own life, using the example as your guide

01**Identify**

In your journal, write down any unhelpful thoughts you may be experiencing.

Thought:

I'll never be able to trust anyone.

Identify the cognitive distortion:

Thinking in extremes, jumping to conclusions

02**Explore**

Examine those thoughts through a list of questions to determine whether those thoughts are helpful or unhelpful.

Challenge Questions:

Q. Do I know for certain that this is true?

A. I'm not 100% certain that I'll never be able to trust someone.

Q. Am I certain of the consequences or results?

A. Not 100%, no. I'm not 100% certain of most things.

Q. What evidence supports this fear or belief?

A. I've been hurt, betrayed, and abused in the past. People are capable of terrible things. I just can't be entirely sure that someone won't try to hurt me again.

Q. What evidence contradicts this fear or belief?

A. There are a couple people in my life who have generally been there when I needed them. They have said before that they care about me, and their actions show it.

Q. Is it possible the opposite could happen? What would be the outcome?

A. I could decide to trust someone, and they don't treat me the way I've been treated in the past. We could build a healthy, strong relationship that supports us both.

Q. Is my negative prediction driven by the intense emotions I'm experiencing?

A. Probably. I'm currently feeling anxiety, fear, and distrust—and annoyance at my anxiety, fear, and distrust.

Q. What is the worst possible thing that could happen? What could I do to cope if it did?

A. I decide to trust someone, and they let me down. It would be painful, even heartbreaking. I would probably cry a lot, talk to my therapist, and write about it in my journal before burning the pages. I could probably get through it though. I have before.

Q. If someone I cared about had this problem, what would I tell them?

A. I'd probably tell them that they deserve to have healthy relationships and feel close to others. I'd tell them that if they're really that anxious, they can take their relationships slow, at a pace that's comfortable for them. I would also tell them to be patient with themselves and remember to take care of themselves first.

Grounding Exercise

PACED BREATHING

Think of your breath as an anchor that holds you to the present. Your breathing serves you right now, in this moment. You cannot take breaths for the past or for the future—only for your present needs.

So let's begin.

ACTIVITY STEPS

- 01** Take a moment to get comfortable. Close your eyes or soften your gaze.
- 02** Rest a hand on your chest or stomach if it helps you feel calm.
- 03** Focus on the image of a breathing heart, one that swells with each inhale and compresses with each exhale.
- 04** Inhale through your nose, envisioning your heart expanding. Count four heartbeats. 1, 2, 3, 4.
- 05** Hold your breath, counting two heartbeats. 1, 2.
- 06** Exhale through your nose, envisioning your heart compressing. Count six heartbeats. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. The key is to try making the exhale longer than the inhale to help calm the body.
- 07** Repeat this for 2–5 minutes, or if you are using the exercise to help manage a trigger, repeat these steps as many times as necessary to feel grounded in the present moment. You may also choose to place both hands over your heart as you envision it expanding and contracting. As your heartbeats slow, your breathing will get deeper, continuing to calm you.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

If you are interested in learning more, we invite you to explore the following articles in the Online Healing Resources section of our website at saprea.org.

- **ASPIRATION AND ITS ROLE IN HEALING FROM CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**
- **DEVELOPING ASPIRATIONAL THINKING**
- **CHALLENGING COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS**

NEXT TOPIC:

#17



EVERYDAY MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness can become a way of being that permeates every aspect of your life, helping you to be attuned to your experiences and redirect your attention to the present with continued intention and an attitude of curiosity.