

## Socratic Techniques for Changing Unhelpful Thoughts

### **Steps:**

- 1) Identify untrue or unhelpful thoughts.
- 2) Do a triangle.
- 3) Try one of the Socratic techniques.
- 4) Do a new triangle.
- 5) Consolidate new thinking.



### **Step 1 Identify Thoughts that are Untrue or Unhelpful:**

Listen for and collect unhelpful thoughts during assessment process, discussion of standardized measures, and during sessions. Elicit from caregivers (especially for younger kids).

When children report upsetting experiences or situations in the present or from the past, identify the thoughts behind the feelings. Sample questions for identifying the thought: *What were you thinking or saying to yourself about the situation? Why did that bother you so much?*

### **Step 2 Do a Triangle:**

Create a triangle using the upsetting situation (past or present). Put the thought on the triangle and get the feelings and behavior associated with it. Normalize thoughts/feelings/behaviors

that are common. Validate parts of the triangle that are understandable. Ask if they would like to feel better and engage in more helpful behaviors. Show how changing the triangle changes the feelings and behaviors.

### **Step 3 Try a Socratic Technique:**

#### □ **More helpful way to think about it?**

Do a triangle with the client. Make sure they understand the thought to feeling connection. Ask them to generate a different thought that would produce more helpful feelings. Even if they do not buy it yet, see if they will agree that the alternative thought would produce more positive feelings.

Example: “From what we’ve talked about so far, it’s clear your triangle (Thought: “I suck at everything” – Feelings: Sad at a 9 out of 10 – Behavior: You isolate yourself, cry, and cut) is causing really hard feelings and leading to some unhelpful behaviors. You’ve told me you want to feel better and make more friends. How might this triangle be keeping those sad feelings going? What else you might say to yourself that would help you actually feel better and then make it easier to get out of your room and connect more with others?”

#### □ **Examining the Evidence**

Use the triangle to identify the untrue or unhelpful thought. Explain that everyone sometimes has thoughts that are not necessarily true and it can be helpful to take a look at the evidence to see whether the thoughts might be off base.

Example: You said that you decided not to leave the house yesterday because you thought something bad would happen.

Tell me why you thought that?

What is the evidence that this thought is true?

What could be seen as evidence that the thought is NOT true (Consider making a list together.)

#### □ **Logical Questioning**

Use questions to understand and then challenge the logic behind the client’s unhelpful thoughts. Keep following up with additional questions to get the client thinking about the thought and start having questions about the validity or usefulness of the thought.

Example: Thought = The sexual abuse was my fault.

Therapist: What makes you say it was your fault?

Client: Because I didn’t tell anyone it was happening. I should not have gone back there.

T: Thinking back, why *didn’t* you tell anyone?

C: Well, he said he would hurt my mother.

T: Oh. Did you believe him?

C: Yes, at the time I did.

T: That sounds really scary. Any other reasons you didn’t tell?

C: I guess I was worried my mom wouldn't believe me.

T: And when you did tell her, she actually did have a hard time believing you.

C: Yeah.

T: So you weren't far off on that, actually. Any other reasons you didn't tell?

C: Well, he told me I would go to jail if the police found out.

T: Did you believe that?

C: Well, I was young. I guess I did.

T: Hmm... Sounds like you actually had some important reasons for not telling. You were worried he would hurt your mother, you were worried about your mom's reaction, and you were convinced you could go to jail for telling. Do those seem like good reasons for a 9-year-old to keep silent?

C: Well, now that I think about it more...I guess it did make sense.

#### □ **Best Friend Role Play**

This technique is designed to get the client to step back and think about how they might talk to a friend that is different from the way they are talking them self [unhelpful cognitions are a form of negative self-talk]. If the client does not have a best friend, use another person the client cares about.

Have the client talk to you as if you were their best friend (or other person they care about) who has been in the same situation (blames self for relationship violence, believes they are a bad person) and is expressing the same negative thoughts. Often people will be more supportive and argue against the negative thinking when they are talking to someone they care about.

Example: Your best friend comes to you and says "I deserved to get beaten up by my boyfriend." What would you tell her? Here, I'll be your best friend. Go ahead.

(TIP: It is best to say the best friend had an IDENTICAL experience to what the client has had. This forces them to really practice challenging how they think about their own situation.)

#### □ **Lists and definitions**

This technique works well for negative thoughts involving overgeneralization of untrue or unhelpful thoughts. By making lists or definitions of the construct the client is being negative about, they can see exceptions to their extreme thinking. It is often most effective to define or make lists about the positive opposite of the negative construct involved in the client's thinking.

Example 1: "Your thought is, 'I am a bad kid.' Let's make a list of all the qualities that make for a good kid. Tell me what you think of when you think about what a good kid is like." After getting a list of attributes, ask the client if they possess any of these attributes, or could cultivate them. If they acknowledge that they have some good qualities, or have the potential to build some, see if they can come up with a new, more accurate/helpful

thought. New thoughts might include, “I have some positive qualities,” “I can work on being a good person.”

Example 2: “The thought ‘My child has lost her innocence and had her childhood taken away by the abuse’ is understandably causing you pain as a parent. Let’s make a list of what are signs that a child is innocent and enjoying their childhood.” Then explore whether their child is showing any of these signs. Frequently parents will be overlooking signs of their child’s resilience or potential for recovery.

Example 3: “You said you have no friends and no one would like you anyway. Let’s come up with a definition of what a good friend is and what makes a person likeable.” Make a list of the qualities of a good friend, review it and ask the client if they have any of these qualities, or could work on them. Follow up by developing a more accurate or helpful thought, which could be, “I have some good friend qualities.” “I can work on being a better friend.”

Example 4: “I can’t trust anyone.” List all the big and small ways people in the world can be trusted, and then explore whether they know anyone who can be trusted even for the little things, even some of the time. A more helpful replacement thought might be, “I can trust some people for some things.”

Example 5: “I am unlovable.” Make a list of qualities that make someone lovable. Explore whether the client has or could develop any of these. Generate a new thought that is more hopeful or constructive such as “There are some things about me that some people would love”.

#### □ **Responsibility Pie**

This technique is used for self-blame, usually in the context of a traumatic event. The idea is to use the metaphor of a pie to uncover and change any unhelpful attributions of blame. One way to do this is described in steps below.

1. Ask your client to make a list of everyone or everything that has some responsibility for what happened.
2. Then draw a pie and ask your client to divide the pie into pieces, showing by size of piece that has the most responsibility for what happened.
3. Next ask questions to explore whether other people or things not listed might also carry some responsibility. Add them to the list.
4. Use questions to understand their reasoning for dividing the pie the way they did. (E.g., “Why did you give your mom such a large piece of pie?”) Use other Socratic techniques to challenge unhelpful or faulty reasoning. (E.g., “You’re saying your mom SHOULD have known her boyfriend was abusing you. Can you think of any reasons why she didn’t figure it out?”)
5. Once you feel the client has come to a more accurate and adaptive understanding of responsibility, and you have helped them re-think any faulty reasoning, and they have included all responsible parties, draw a new pie and ask them to divide it again.

6. If the pie still seems distorted in ways that are not helpful, you can again ask questions to better understand, and if necessary challenge, their reasoning. Then re-draw the pie. It is not always necessary for the client to end up with zero responsibility in the final pie.

Example (condensed for illustration):

Let's draw a pie with all the people and circumstances that have any type of responsibility for when you got raped at that party when you had been drinking and were kind of out of it.

- So who do you consider to have responsibility? Besides yourself who contributed?
- OK you're right the boy who did it has responsibility. Tell me why?
- You said your girlfriend could see that you were drunk and didn't do anything when she saw him take you into the bedroom. OK so she gets a piece of the pie.
- What about the parents who were not home and didn't take precautions about their son having a party with drinking?
- How about the people who sold the alcohol to the underage guys?
- So we can see that a lot of people have at least some part of responsibility for the situation. You regret that you drank so much but now you realize that there were a lot of different people who had responsibility for the situation, mostly the boy who raped you.

#### **TIP Give new information when it makes sense**

Giving information is NOT actually a Socratic technique. But sometimes it is an important part of challenging negative thinking.

Example – Client thinks, “I’m an idiot for letting the sexual abuse happen.”

New information: “I’d like you to take a look at this list of things that many abusers have done to get kids they want to abuse to let their guard down and build trust and obedience. Tell me, do you see anything on here that you recognize?”

#### **Step 4 Make a New Triangle:**

After you have used some of the above techniques to challenge the old thought, ask the client to generate possible new thoughts that might be more accurate, or more helpful (leading to less painful feelings, more adaptive behavior, or supporting movement toward the client's goals). Once they have identified a new thought, have them put it on a new triangle (or the old triangle using a different color ink) to see how feelings and behavior might change with the new thinking.

#### **Step 5 Consolidate New Thinking:**

Remind the client that thoughts can be habits, and they may need to continue to challenge their old thought, especially when upsetting situations happen.

Consider recording the rationale or evidence that was uncovered or the client came up with to support the new thought. This can be reviewed during and between sessions.