



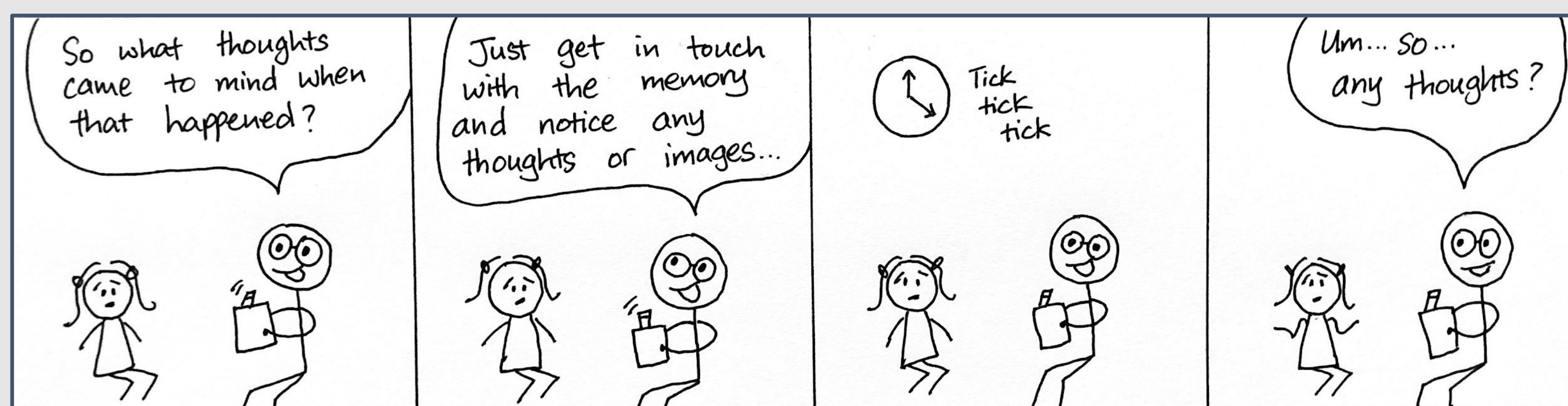
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Thought Bubbles Therapy Cards: An Innovative Approach to Working with Thoughts and Feelings

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Background to the Issue



The above was a common scenario that my colleagues and I experienced in our clinical work as child and adolescent psychologists in Singapore. In our therapeutic work, we had to improvise and find creative ways to work with kids on identifying and modifying their thoughts. We developed the *Thought Bubbles* cards with the objective of helping kids and adults notice and choose their thoughts in a fun and light-hearted way. After sifting through dozens of different thought statements frequently observed in our clinical practice, we arrived at 56 thoughts represented by 7 characters that personified different ways of thinking.

Approach

In *Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy* (CBT), individuals are taught to recognise and identify unhelpful thinking styles such as 'mindreading', 'catastrophising', 'jumping to conclusions' and 'black-and-white thinking'. In the *Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*¹, Edmund Bourne described four types of negative self-talk: 'The Worrier', 'The Critic', 'The Victim' and 'The Perfectionist'.

Sorting through the thoughts that we observed most frequently in our practice, our team came to a consensus on four types of "less helpful" thoughts personified by:

The Controller, who wants things to be a certain way and experiences distress when people or situations do not meet expectations.

The Worrier, who is filled with concerns about the possibility that things would go wrong, that people would judge or criticise and/or that the situation would be too difficult to cope with.

The Judge, who is the critical voice that is harsh on self and others.

The Victim, who often considers the situation hopeless and feels powerless to change things.

¹ Bourne, Edmund J. "Chapter 8: Self-Talk" in *The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook*, 6th Edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc, 2015.



In CBT, unhelpful ways of thinking were often countered with more helpful ways of thinking. The team decided to create personas for "more helpful" ways of responding to our experiences. As we were also trained in *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (ACT), we included elements of the six core processes of ACT that aimed to increase psychological flexibility, namely Acceptance, Cognitive Defusion, Being Present, Self as Context, Values and Committed Action.

Our "more helpful" thoughts were thus personified by:

The Observer, who takes a step back from the situation and notices thoughts, feelings and experiences with non-judgmental openness and curiosity.

The Healer, who embraces acceptance of experiences, is kind to self and others, endeavours to live according to his or her values and sees opportunities to grow and learn in all situations.

The Problem Solver, who engages in behavioural change with psychological flexibility by realizing that there is more than one way of looking at or approaching a problem.

Outcome and Lessons Learnt

Two simple surveys were conducted to determine the usefulness and effectiveness of the cards: (1) a face-to-face survey with 9 respondents, ages ranging from 10 to 73 years of age, and (2) a survey that was conducted as part of an online course² with 16 respondents.

Method: Respondents were asked to think of a distressing situation and using the *Thought Bubbles* cards, to choose thoughts that they had in the situation, describe their feelings, bodily responses and actions and rate the intensity of their feelings. Subsequently, they were asked to think about how they would prefer to respond in that situation instead and to pick thoughts that would facilitate those responses. They were then asked to indicate their feelings, bodily responses and how they were likely to act when they viewed their situation with those thoughts in mind.

Results: The 9 respondents in the face-to face survey indicated that their response to the situation changed from feeling 'powerless', 'upset and helpless', 'angry', 'agitated', 'weirded out', 'challenged', 'sad and uncertain', 'accepting' and 'pressured' to feeling 'at ease', 'open-minded', 'ambivalent', 'calm', 'pleased', 'happier' and 'confident'. For the online course, 12 out of the 16 participants experienced a decrease in their distress level. Of the 4 respondents that did not report changes in their distress levels, 3 of them reported initial distress levels of 0 and 1. All respondents found the experiential exercise to be helpful.

Respondents found the *Thought Bubbles* cards useful for identifying, categorising, changing, reframing and choosing thoughts and perceptions. The cards were also described as "simple and practical", "a great way to break it down for clients", "stress-relieving" and useful for reflection and self-discovery. Therapists indicated that they would be helpful for use with clients, especially children and youth.

Suggestions for how the cards could be improved included using different pictures, increasing the font size and adding other thoughts that were not included.

² <https://learnpsych.thinkific.com/courses/cbt-act-thought-bubbles?fbclid=IwAR1YbtGq6qbFCYQIQAEQBWnRa3lycrAc9-BJnPo9MsO35PzYXjhAcxcC4>

Significance/Impact

Anecdotal feedback revealed that the *Thought Bubbles* cards had been used in a variety of ways:

In counselling and therapy, with approaches that span Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, play therapy, sandtray work, Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing and family therapy;

In educational settings, where the cards had been used to elicit conversations about thoughts and feelings with young people of various ages;

In organizational settings, where the cards were used for personal development and team-building exercises and workshops.

In the words of writer and researcher Corrie Tan: "How does an adorable card game manage to be so confronting and affirming at the same time? As someone who's navigating a rewarding but demanding career and still relatively new at married life, I found *Thought Bubbles* to be a wonderful tool, helping me to take an aerial view of how I (and others) see myself – but also a close look at what these perceptions mean and how they can shift and change over time. It's easy to play but throws up deep questions along the way. I can't wait to share this with more of my friends and family."

