

SUPER
QUICK
SKILLS

Manage Your Stress

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How do I manage my stressful thinking?

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summary*



Challenging irrational beliefs, practising self-compassion and meditating change the way you see your thoughts and relieve them of their stress.



60 second
summary



Irrational beliefs are inaccurate beliefs that we have created about ourselves and the world. These can often cause stress as we base our expectations on them. Those expectations tend to then be wrong. Changing our relationship to our thoughts by practising self-compassion and meditation has been shown to not only reduce stress but to also improve learning and concentration.

We have already looked at two techniques to change your stressful thinking (self-affirmations in Section 2 and Stress Mindsets in Section 3). In this section we look at changing irrational beliefs, and changing our relationship to our beliefs (with self-compassion and meditation).

What are irrational beliefs?

Sometimes what is causing our stress is our irrational thinking. A psychologist, Albert Ellis, once wrote that most of the thinking errors he saw in his clients came from three irrational beliefs:

- 1 To be a worthwhile person, I must achieve everything I set out to achieve (e.g. 'I feel totally worthless, I didn't get the top mark in the class AGAIN').
- 2 My life's conditions should be easy so I can achieve everything I want without any great effort (e.g. 'I hate going to the library; why isn't all the information online? Lecturers are so lazy making more work for us').
- 3 Everyone should like me (or, at least treat me well) and if they do not, they should be punished (e.g. 'my tutor group are all a bunch of no-hopers, and yet they complain about me, just because I forgot about our meetings. It is totally unfair').

It is perfectly ok to prefer to be liked, to achieve what you want and to have good life conditions. The problem is if you absolutely expect them and feel it is a catastrophe when things don't go your way.

Irrational Beliefs

Thoughts that are illogical (but appear reasonable to the person believing them). They set up unrealistic expectations and can cause a great deal of stress as they are inaccurate. For example, 'everyone must love me, and if they don't then I am unlovable'.

Once you have recognized irrational beliefs in yourself, start challenging them. Prove them wrong. Laughing at yourself when you think an irrational thought is a great way to start. However, often when we realize we are being irrational, we beat ourselves up and tell ourselves we are stupid.

What is self-compassion?

When we criticize ourselves we can activate our stress response. We think we are helping ourselves by putting ourselves down, but often it is not helpful at all. The antidote to self-criticism is self-compassion. Self-compassion is about being aware we are suffering, realizing that everyone suffers and being kind to ourselves (not judging ourselves so harshly) when we recognize this.

Often we are better at being compassionate towards others than we are to ourselves. One way around this is to think about something about yourself that stresses you in some way. Then imagine receiving a letter advising you about this issue from a very wise old relative you didn't know you had. What would the letter say?

Self-compassion When you are suffering, this is the experience of being kind to yourself, realizing others suffer as well as you and being open to what you are experiencing (accepting any negative emotions associated with your suffering).