



Exercise: The Emotional Impact of Automatic Thoughts

Our minds constantly process information without our full awareness. Many (even most) of our thoughts and mental images spring to mind without any conscious initiation or involvement on our part. They just seem to appear out of nowhere. While reading this page, for example, certain phrases might trigger thoughts and memories for you. These thoughts happen quickly and automatically. We can have up to tens of thousands of thoughts flash through our minds in a given day. Cognitive psychologists call them “automatic thoughts” because they happen automatically, without any intentional effort. Although these thoughts happen quickly, you can train yourself to become aware of them as they happen. If you pay attention to what’s going through your mind next time you sit in a meeting, for example, you may notice all sorts of automatic thoughts (e.g., “What else do I need at the grocery store?”, “I wonder where he got that tie?”, “The way he’s clicking that pen is so annoying”).

While automatic thoughts may seem inconsequential, they can actually play a very important role in our emotional health. This is because our thoughts can have a direct influence on our feelings. To put it plainly, *the way we feel can stem from the way we think*. If we interpret a situation in a negative way, we are likely to have negative feelings; if we interpret the same situation positively, we are likely to have more positive feelings. Consider these examples:

Situation: A coworker did not acknowledge my comment in a meeting.

Automatic Thought	Possible Emotional Reaction
“She thinks I’m an idiot.”	Sad, Insecure, Angry
“She disagrees with me and will want to talk to me about this in private.”	Nervous, Anxious
“They don’t consider me part of the team.”	Sad, Isolated
“She had too much to think about and forgot to acknowledge me.”	Calm/Neutral

Plan to take special notice of your automatic thoughts next time you have an opportunity in a workplace situation. If it is possible, try to make some notes right away. Keep track of the thoughts and their emotional impact. Later in the day, revisit the thoughts and ask yourself whether in retrospect you feel that they accurately represented the situation. It is especially important to recognize thoughts that have a negative emotional impact and also fail to represent a situation accurately. Over time, these thoughts can have a significant impact on your perceptions of your role and effectiveness in the workplace.



Situation: _____

Automatic Thought	Emotional Reaction	Accuracy of Thought (in retrospect)