

3-Step

Thinking Hack Pack

*Change Your Life
One Thought at a Time*

Written by
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Presented by
CheckPoint.org.au

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Change your
Thoughts
and you Change
Your World.

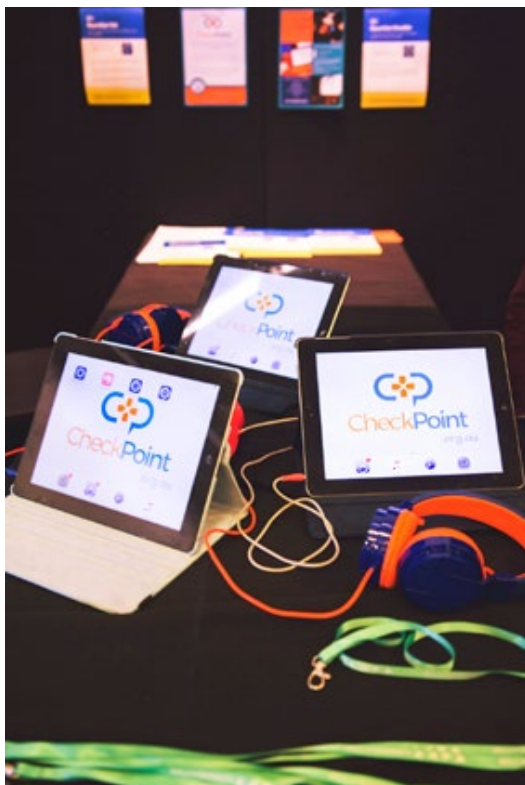
Norman Vincent Peale

CheckPoint's

3-Step Thinking Hack Pack

*Change Your Life
One Thought at a Time*

Thank you so much for downloading our self-help guide to help improve your wellbeing using these very simple thought hacks. We hope by the end of this pack, you learn how supririsingly easy it can be to think healthily!



Introduction

CheckPoint is a nonprofit which aims to improve global mental health using games and technology.

We have created this guide so that anyone, anywhere can start their journey toward a more fulfilling life using basic psychological concepts.

Over the next few pages we'll discuss what a thought is, how they make us feel, and how we can use them to our advantage.

The 3 Steps Of Thought Control

(sorry, not the Professor Xavier kind)

1. LISTEN

2. LABEL

3. HACK



1 Listen To Your Thoughts

image: Life is Strange (Donnod Entertainment)

What Is A Thought?



It's an odd thing to say that **just because you think something, it doesn't make it true.**

For some people, this concept can feel quite unsettling. After all, your thoughts shape your perception of the world, and this is the only thing you know or have ever known. It has gotten you where you are and has kept you alive 100% of the time leading up to this moment.

Therefore it feels very strange - even scary - to acknowledge that your own thoughts aren't necessarily helpful, or even representative of the true situation.

For example, have you ever caught yourself thinking something like one of these?

- 💬 I can't do this
- 💬 They're talking about me
- 💬 I look terrible today

The Thing About Thinking

Sound like you?

You're not alone. Everyone gets these intrusive negative thoughts. They can be about yourself, about other people, about the dog - really, they can comment on anything and everything. They often occur without you even realising it. In fact, these "mistruths" have a name. We call them "ANTs" - Automatic Negative Thoughts.

The Evolution of the ANT. These thoughts make sense from a point of view of survival. When we were cavemen, it could be more beneficial to focus on the negative than the positive: for example, if a sabretooth tiger is coming, is it more useful to think, "How cute!" or "How terrifying!"? Of course, the answer is the latter - if our ancestors could identify a threat early, they could prepare themselves to fight or run for their lives. Our brain is literally wired to see dangers in the world around us.

Thoughts Lead to Feelings. The next step in this process is the activation of feelings. Thoughts send messages to parts of your brain - the amygdala, which deals with instinct and emotion; the hippocampus, which stores and processes memories; and the prefrontal cortex, which helps with emotional regulation and inhibitions. Together they work to figure out how you feel about a situation - and what you will do about it.

Feelings Lead to Behaviour. So if you have a negative thought, it could make you feel defensive, distressed or afraid. When people are vulnerable in this way, it can cause them to behave in ways which are harmful to themselves, or to others.

The Power of Positivity. Fortunately, the same is true in reverse! Whilst we don't often need to fight off tigers, there is still a place for these powerful but difficult emotions. When we experience them in a positive way, it can produce a beneficial physiological response.

Tuning In

Now that you know what a thought is and why they happen, you can start listening in to your own.

The easiest way of doing this is to start a diary. This is something you can add to your daily routine, much like brushing your teeth. If you are forgetful, why not set a reminder on your phone, or associate your diary with daily events like dinnertime?

During diary-time, you have a think about events that were good or bad during the day (you could even do this multiple times a day if you live a busy and active lifestyle!). You go backwards, considering all the associated thoughts and feelings, what was said and by whom, and how things turned out.

Cover the following:

- What happened first?
- How did it make you feel?
- What thoughts and images were going through your head at the time?
- What did your body feel like? Did you have any physical sensations?
- What happened next?

At this point, we are not going to try to intervene, or challenge this. We are merely observing what has happened to collect information about how we respond to certain situations and what is happening in our mind and body.

Situation/ Trigger	Feelings	Thoughts	Physical Sensations	Outcome
<i>What happened? What was said? Who was there?</i>	<i>eg Anxious Angry Joyful</i>	<i>The words in your mind at the time, use full sentences</i>	<i>Consider the chest, abdomen, limbs, face</i>	<i>How did you behave? How did others respond?</i>
<i>eg Dentist appointment Lunch with a friend</i>	<i>Worried Excited, Valued</i>	<i>This is going to hurt! What a relaxing day.</i>	<i>Stomach cramps, fast breathing Relaxed</i>	<i>Missed appointment, got a toothache Felt close to friend, felt happy for the day</i>

A man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt, is sitting at a desk in a dimly lit office. He is looking down and writing in a notebook with a pen. On the desk, there is a stack of papers and a blue folder. In the background, there is a calendar on the wall that says "NOVEMBER 2012", a printer, and some office supplies. A teal banner is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

2 Label Your Thoughts

image: Uncharted 4 (Naughty Dog)

Flavours of ANT

How can you tell if a thought is an ANT or not? When you first start thinking about thoughts (what a concept!) it can be difficult to know which are helpful and which aren't. In some cases it's useful to work backwards from a negative feeling. When you identify the triggering thought, you can start to analyse its contents. Which category does it fall under?

Fortune Telling



These thoughts tell us that something bad is going to happen, based on past experience. When you are sure what the outcome will be, this often leads to not trying any more.

"I failed the last exam so I'll definitely fail this one."

Mindreading



Often when we observe others, we assume what they are thinking and feeling based on our own expectations and experiences, which we project onto others. It leads us to behave defensively, which can come across badly to the other person.

"He thinks I'm annoying."

"She is really angry at me right now."

Always-or-Never Thinking



This sounds relatively harmless, but actually thinking in extremes can be very influential to our emotions. Often it is a habit that we don't realise we are doing - we even speak these thoughts aloud. Of course, these statements are rarely true - but because we think them, it feels like they *are* true.

"The train is always late."

"I never get work done on time."

All-Or-Nothing Thinking



Similar to always-and-never statements, these thoughts are heavily weighted to the extent of being dichotomous. When we think in black and white terms like this, we miss the grey in between. It's hard to be objective about a situation if we think of it as all-good, or all-bad.

"All football fans are violent."

"There's nothing anyone can do to help me."

Labeling



It can sometimes make us feel better to call someone a jerk under our breath or in the heat of the moment. This might feel like a flippant comment, but psychologically it lumps them as a

person in with the label. It is much healthier to rephrase and attribute the label to behaviour rather than character; ie, ***"He's a jerk," to: "He's behaving like a jerk"***. This simple alteration completely changes the feel of the sentence and alleviates a lot of the heat behind it.

Catastrophising



It might feel like the end of the world to fail a test or miss out on a job opportunity. But is the world really going to end? Unless you are an environmental scientist - probably not. When we put unnecessary weight to things like this, it increases stress levels and causes feelings of anxiety and even despair.

"If I don't get the best grades, I'll never get a good job."

Personalising



When we blame ourselves for a potentially irrelevant event, this is personalising. Like when your partner is frowning, and you think it is because they disapprove of something you did - when in reality they had a bad day at work. It results in feelings which are misplaced and distressing.

"My friend is upset - it must be because I didn't text her."

Believing Feelings



Whilst thoughts often lead to feelings, the same is true in reverse. We often respond instinctively to situations based on our own experiences, fears, hopes, etc. However the feelings that we get can sometimes be based more on these internal factors than objective external ones. Often it is useful to take a step back and think about how we feel might not be truly justified, and consider how this might impact the situation as a whole.

"I feel really angry at them, which means they must have done something wrong."

Selective Filtering



This is a very common one and something that even the best of us fail at! This means when we overlook the positive, and focus on the negative. The classic example is the performer who gets 99 messages of fanmail, and one message which is insulting. They only focus on the insult and take it to heart, ignoring the 99 other messages which were positive, complimentary and encouraging.

Shoulds/Musts/Can'ts



In Star Wars, Yoda says to Luke, "Do or not do, there is no try."

I don't agree with this statement and actually believe it is a relatively unhealthy way of thinking. When we think in such extreme terms, it removes the ability to consider the more gentle terms in between.

Words like should, must and can't are very emotionally loaded. They imply there are no half-measures, which means that if the extreme is not reached, there has been a failure.

These loaded words include:

Should / Shouldn't

Must / Mustn't

Will / Won't

Can't / Cannot

Ought to / Ought not to

Shall / Shan't

"I'm on a diet, so I can't eat chocolate."

"I must get an A on this homework."

It is more kind and more reasonable to swap out these words for something that adds balance and allows flexibility.

"I'm on a diet, so I can try not to eat chocolate."

"It would be nice to get an A on this homework."

Blaming



Blaming can be quite harmful to both ourselves, and others around us. It describes taking a negative event, and ascribing responsibility of it to one person or group of people, when in reality all situations are multifactored and it is more helpful to think of them in this balanced way.

There are two kinds of blaming ANT:

Blaming Others

It can alleviate feelings of remorse and guilt, by placing the responsibility for a negative event on someone else. This happens commonly in relationships. Blaming the other person for things such as arguments, accidents and other normal and natural things, leads to victimisation of self and resentment toward the other person. This is of course harmful in the long term, even if in the short term it might feel good to be "right".

Blaming Yourself

When we say things like, ***"it's all my fault,"*** we put unnecessary burden on ourselves for something that was probably not fully in our control. It is important to take responsibility for your actions, but not to the extent of owning what should belong to somebody else.

A character in a futuristic, metallic suit with red accents stands in a dark, blue-toned environment. The character's right arm is raised, reaching towards a large, glowing, translucent blue pyramid that floats in the air. The pyramid has a complex, circuit-like pattern on its surface. In the background, there are faint, glowing blue lines and shapes that resemble a digital or networked space. The overall atmosphere is high-tech and mysterious.

3 HACK Your Thoughts

image: Mass Effect 3 (Bioware)

Thought Challenging

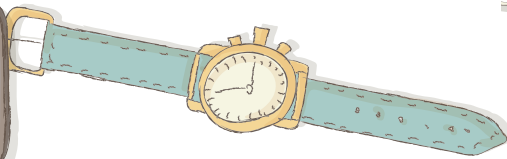


Cognitive challenging or “thought reframing” involves analysing and intervening in thought processes to impact on feelings and behaviours. It involves looking at thoughts as a sentence, and then rewording that sentence so it feels better.

Who is it for?:

- People who feel worried or sad.
- People who are introspective and good at reflecting on situations.
- People who have one problem they are trying to fix.
- People who have physical sensations to emotional issues.

Thought Tolerance

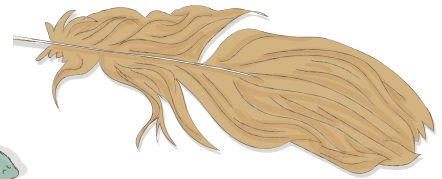


Some people experience very big emotions, and might have a habit of beating themselves up over how they feel. Thought tolerance involves accepting and allowing those feelings to be, and then to dissipate, without letting them taking control.

Who is it for?:

- People who experience strong emotions often.
- People who sometimes have mood swings.
- People who are self-critical.
- People who would like to learn how to take control over emotion.

Thought Defusion



When neurons become linked in our minds, thoughts can come along without us even realising it, where they set off all sorts of feelings. Those thoughts might not have any real place in the situation, and can be let go, never to bother us again.

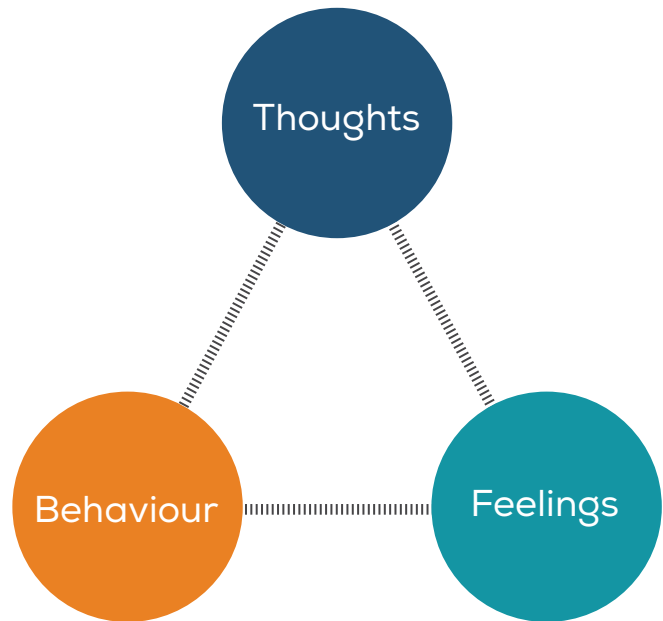
Who is it for?:

- People who feel worried or sad.
- People who aren't really sure how they feel.
- People whose thoughts are sometimes repetitive or ruminating.

Thought Challenging

Cognitive challenging comes from the principals taught in CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy). It involves evaluating the thoughts you have, and following the path to feelings and behaviours.

Now you have your own thought diary, you can add an extra column, to challenge those negative and unhelpful thoughts.



Unhelpful Thought

Feelings

New Thought

No one likes me

Lonely
Unwanted

Sure, some people don't like me. But that's normal. Others think I'm pretty rad!

I failed at this because I can never do anything right

Worthless
Hopeless

I've made some mistakes but a lot of the time, I make good choices.

I should always produce my best work

Stressed
Inadequate

Part of improving is producing work that can be improved. It's unrealistic to expect myself to be perfect all of the time.

Ways to Challenge Thoughts

There are all sorts of ways you can reappraise those pesky negative thoughts. Different styles work for different people - try to find which one is right for you. Ask yourself these questions:

- *Are you using loaded words? "Must" "Shouldn't" "Can't" "Always" "Never" all view a situation in very black or white terms and don't allow flexibility. How much grey is in your thought?*
- *What would someone else say about the situation if they were giving you advice? Think of someone close to you who thinks very differently. How would they respond if it was them?*
- *Are you looking at all of the available facts, or just the negative ones, or the ones which support your thought?*

Why not try these thought challenge activities:

- **Take Your Thought To Court.** What is the evidence for it? What is the evidence against it? Try acting as the defense and prosecution to look at how true your thought really is.
- **What-If Balancing.** If you find yourself facing every situation with a thought of "what if it goes wrong?" try this simple exercise. For every negative "what if", come up with a positive "what if".
- **Rewrite the Rules.** We all have assumptions or rules that we live by, like, "If I don't straighten my hair, people will think I'm ugly". Write down your rules and think whether it helps or not; the pros and cons. If there are more cons - rewrite the rule to something more helpful.
- **Change The Forecast.** Often we do something called "catastrophising" - assuming the worst will happen. But in reality, it probably is much less likely than it feels. Think about how often this has happened in the past, and how bad it would really be if it happened now. Often the concern around it goes away.

Thought Tolerance



Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practise which teaches how to pay attention to the present moment. The basis of thought tolerance is that everything is viewed in context, and mindfulness helps us to do that.

The three pillars of mindfulness are:

- It is on purpose
- In the present
- And non-judgmental.

How Will That Help?

The wonderful thing about mindfulness is its power to ground us in a moment, which helps to distance from emotion and teach tolerance of self. Instead of getting swept away by anger or distress, we can take a step back and view those feelings with a gentle curiosity; to be separate from them and one with them simultaneously.

We recommend [Stop, Breathe and Think's](#) extensive library of guided meditations.

Distract From Distress

Finding a way to soothe and distract yourself will help you to cope with distress much more easily.

ACCEPTS

Activities - do something else!
Community - contribute to it.
Compare - to people less fortunate.
Emotions - try to find happiness.
Prioritise - things less distressing.
Thoughts - focus on pleasant things!
Sensations - find something with an intense flavour or feeling.

IMPROVE

Imagery - take your mind elsewhere.
Meaning - find it in these feelings.
Pray - need not be religious!
Relax - try breathing exercises.
One - focus on a meditation.
Vacation - however brief.
Encouragement - you can be your own cheerleader.

Thought Defusion

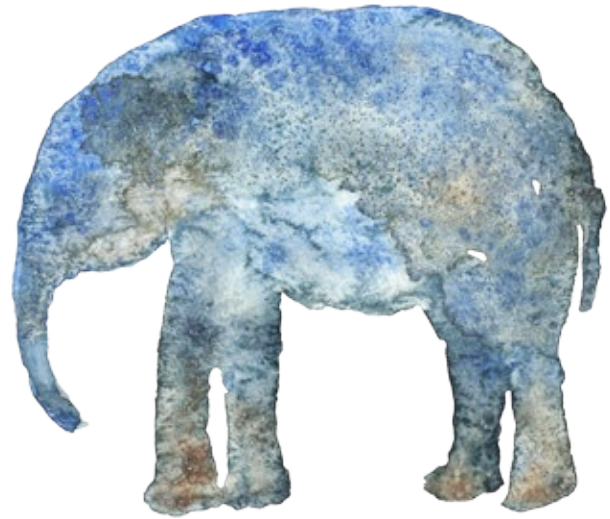
When we think a thought, it drags up other thoughts, feelings and sensations that have been associated with it in the past, whether we like it or not!

For example - don't think of an elephant.

You thought of an elephant, didn't you?

Did you also have an image of an elephant in your mind? Or the sound it makes? Did you think of Dumbo?

This is called “cognitive fusion”.



Think about a situation where you felt panicked. It might have been a speech or worry about a loved one. What happened after? Did your tummy feel uncomfortable? Did you have other thoughts: “People will laugh” accompanied by a mental image of an audience in laughter; or “What if he’s gotten lost,” followed by a number of other “what if” statements ending with a terrible accident.

So what do you do when all these thoughts, feelings and sensations are linked to each other?

You de-fuse them. Thought defusion involves looking **at** thoughts rather than **from** thoughts.

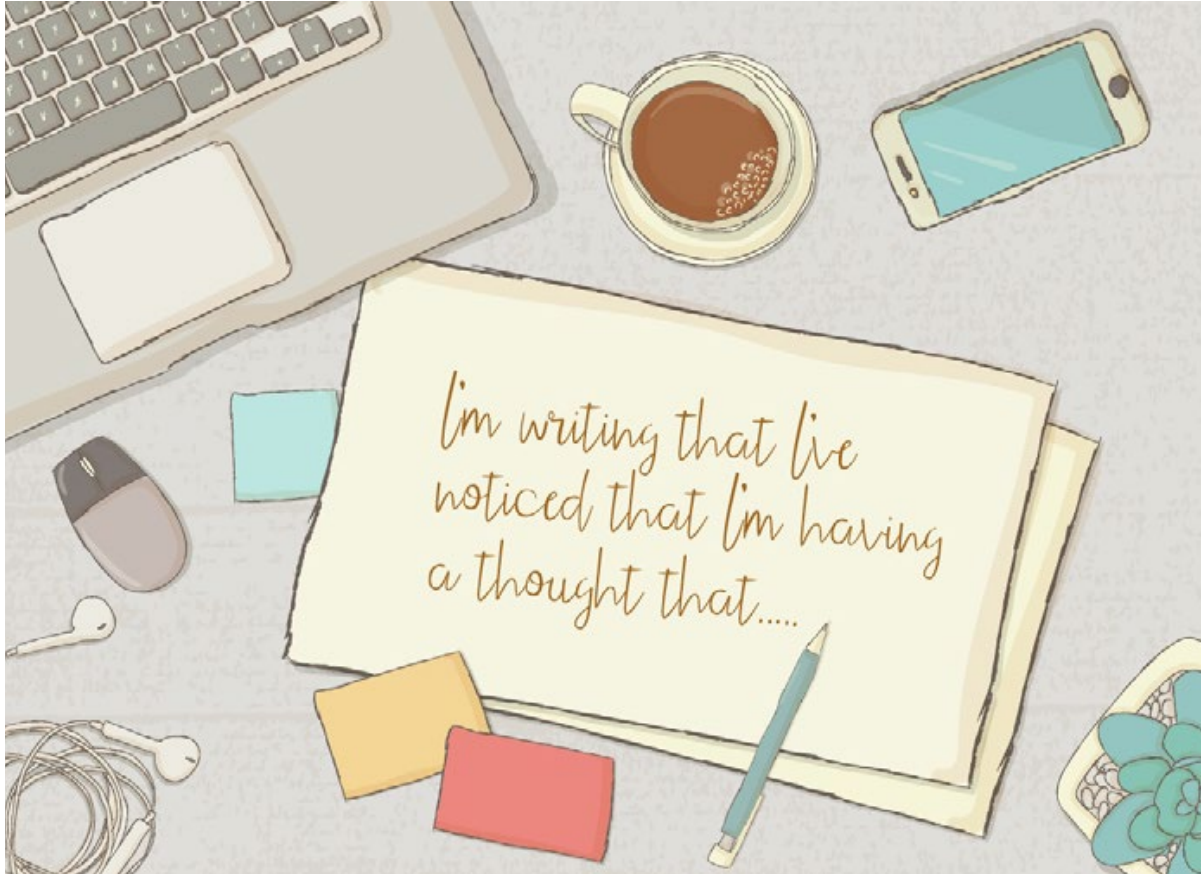
When you defuse a thought, you let it go and it loses its power. In your brain, your neurons are becoming physically rewired, to not associate those connections anymore. Eventually the thought won’t even pop up, or when it does it will have no other effects on you. In the short term, letting a thought go can remove so much of the emotion behind it, and allow you to get on with your day.

There are over 100 techniques identified for letting go of thoughts in this way!

Thought Defusion

Techniques:

- *Sing thought in the tune of happy birthday*
- *Say the thought over and over again until it doesn't have a meaning any more (works with phrases)*
- *Watch the thought go by, like it is in a parade and you are just observing from the sidelines*
- *Put the thought into a cloud and watch the cloud float away*
- *Talk to the thought: "Oh hey you. Thanks for that, brain!"*
- *Distancing: "I'm stupid" » "I just had a thought that I was stupid" » "I notice that I'm having the thought that I'm stupid"*



Finishing Up

This handbook is meant as an introduction to these concepts, for you to go away and research further yourself. Now that you have learned some of these skills, the door is open to an entirely different way of experiencing life - a way we hope will help you to be happier and more fulfilled.

Please note, that this is not a prescription, official advice, or affiliated with any professional body. If you have been affected in any way or suspect you may be suffering with a mental health issue, please see your doctor.

All our thought hacks are taken from established therapies. If you'd like to know more, or find other self-help tools, we recommend [Psychology Tools](#), and [mindhealthconnect](#).

CheckPoint only exists in doing this sort of work with the generosity of our donors and sponsors. If you are able to, we would appreciate any and all contributions to our cause.

We also benefit from spreading the word! If you appreciated this guide, please share it around.





About the Author

Dr Jennifer Hazel is a fully qualified medical doctor who has practised in both the UK and Australia. She is the founder and executive director of CheckPoint. She spent several years working in the Emergency Department before specialising in Psychiatry. Jennifer is a passionate advocate for the use of game technology in the therapeutic setting. To this end, she contributes to clinical research and works with both games industry and clinical professionals to provide education, consultation and resources.

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