
SESSION ONE

Thinking Our Thoughts

In this program, you will explore four different levels of your life, starting with the individual level, the self. Your risk of becoming a victim or victimizer (perpetrator of violence) is influenced by your personal history, including your family background, level of education, race, socioeconomic status, how you behave, and how others behave toward you. Things that contribute to risk are being abused in childhood or adulthood, mental health issues, alcohol and substance misuse, and a history of behaving aggressively (*World Health Organization, 2004*).

In Part A, the topic we explore is the self. In this session and the five after it, the focus will be on ourselves as individuals and on issues that create the risk of violence in our lives. You will consider how your thoughts and feelings influence your behaviors. These sessions will provide you with an opportunity to get to know yourself better.

The goals of this session are:

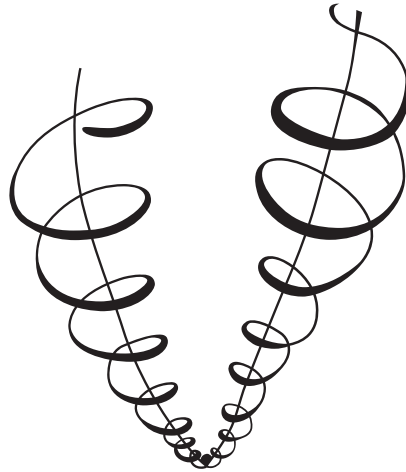
- To examine typical habits in thinking and
- To understand how our thoughts influence our feelings and behaviors.

If you are beginning this session by yourself, take a minute or two to give yourself time to unwind, relax, and focus on where you are now. Just get settled in the way that feels best for you. Allow yourself to notice how you're breathing and then inhale gently and exhale fully. Repeat the breathing exercise two more times.

You may want to do the Creating a Container activity on page 18 of this workbook. As you repeat the calming and grounding activities from the sessions, they become easier and more natural to do.

Spirals of Violence and Nonviolence

(Transformation)



Violence
(Constriction)

Nonviolence
(Expansion)

The Spirals of Violence and Nonviolence

These spirals illustrate violence and nonviolence. The downward one on the left is the spiral of violence. The line in the middle represents aggression, violence, or use of force. As violence becomes more a part of your life, it constricts and limits your life. For victims, it may mean being shut off from contact with family members, friends, and social services—feeling isolated and alone. A victim also may be afraid to go to places and people who can help. For people who abuse (perpetrators or victimizers), it may mean trying to keep the violence a secret and hiding from law enforcement agencies. For both, the inner self (thoughts, feelings, and values) becomes more limited and hidden, and the outer self (behavior and relationships) becomes more isolated.

The upward spiral on the right is the spiral of nonviolence. The center line still represents violence, because, even if you are in the process of recovery or healing, the experience of violence does not go away. However, in the upward spiral, there is increasing room for growth and healing and many other life experiences. As you stop participating in aggressive or violent behavior and begin to heal from the violence, the possibility of experiencing meaningful change in your life is created. The goal is to become whole: to have your inner self connected to your outer self. Then there can be truth and integrity in your life. Integrity is connection and congruence between the inner and outer selves.

For some people, acting violently is one of their only responses to many different situations. However, there can be a turning point. It is when people *decide* to make changes in their lives. This creates the beginning of the upward spiral. This is the process of transformation: when a person changes her or their life and can say, “Who I am today is not who I was!”

Thinking, Feeling, and Substance Use

The use of alcohol and other drugs affects a person’s thoughts and feelings. This is why they are called “mood-altering” substances. Using them has a physical effect on your brain—on how you experience and react to things and on your decisions and behaviors.

Automatic Thoughts

Even without drugs or alcohol, things can happen to affect our thinking processes. We are always describing the world around us to ourselves. We label our experiences as good or bad, happy or sad, painful or pleasurable, dangerous or safe. These labels come from within us—from what we were taught as children, from our life experiences, and from our values and fears. This self-talk colors how we see our lives. Our interpretations are automatic; they continually flow through our minds and often go unnoticed, but they are powerful enough to create intense feelings. Automatic thoughts just pop into our minds. We are so used to them that we don’t even notice what is happening. No matter how irrational they are, we almost always believe our automatic thoughts because we are not aware of where they are coming from. They are old habits. They may be bad habits that can lead us to think and respond irrationally and contribute to violent behavior. They may be unkind thoughts about ourselves, or they may be influenced by substance use. Almost all automatic thought patterns have a lot of distortions because they occur in reaction to events in our lives. However many people don’t examine them to see if they are true or how they will influence their behaviors.

A large part of developing self-knowledge or awareness is recognizing our automatic thoughts and catching them before they lead to irrational ideas or feelings. In this way, we learn to become aware of and take charge of our thoughts rather than letting our thoughts control us.

Cognitive Distortion

When your mind convinces you of something that isn't really true, it is called a "cognitive distortion." Such thoughts are also called "thinking errors," "negative self-talk," "twisted thinking," and "distorted information processing." Such distortions or inaccurate thoughts usually are used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions. Here are some examples of this type of thinking:

- *Overgeneralizing*: You tend to speak in terms of something "always" or "never" happening. For example, if you fail to do something, you may say, "I never remember things I'm supposed to." You may also interpret events in this way and say things like, "Why does this stuff always happen to me?"
- *All-or-nothing thinking*: Things are either right or wrong, black or white, great or horrible. There are only either/or categories; there is no middle ground or gray area. For example, if something doesn't live up to your expectations in some area, you may see it as a total failure.
- *Mental filtering*: You can let one fact or situation or event color your view of things so that you see everything through a darkened lens. For example, if you have been abused by a man, you may think that all men are rotten or dangerous.
- *Disqualifying the positive*: You may ignore or explain away any positive facts or experiences. If you can rationalize that something good "doesn't count" for some reason, you can maintain a negative belief system.
- *Personalizing*: You may take responsibility or blame for something bad that you had no control over. You may tell yourself, "It must be my fault somehow."
- *Mind reading*: You may decide that someone doesn't like you or thinks they are better than you without getting to know the person or checking your assumptions if you do. When you interpret someone's facial expressions or nonverbal communication with no other input, you are projecting what is in your mind, not the other person's.
- *Magnifying or minimizing*: You may give something more credit or more importance than it deserves or you may do the opposite and give it less credit or less importance than is called for. Sometimes this is called "making a mountain out of a molehill" or the reverse.
- *Jumping to conclusions*: You may decide early on that something is bad or will turn out badly, even without evidence to support that belief. You may make

assumptions about things without waiting for more information. For example, if something is missing, you may assume that a particular person has stolen it before you have looked thoroughly for it.

- *Fortune telling*: When you assume that you know how things will turn out before they even happen, you are fortune telling. If you are looking at things through a darkened lens, you probably will predict a doom-and-gloom scenario.
- *Emotional reasoning*: You may let your feelings direct your interpretation of things. For example, if you are down, you may interpret things people do or say negatively. If you are feeling “up,” you may see things through “rose-colored glasses.” In short, “I feel it, so it must be true.”
- *Using “should” and “must” statements*: Your expectations may be directed by a rigid list of rules about how you and others should behave. If you think that you “should” or “should not” be a certain way, you may feel guilt or shame when you don’t think you live up to that expectation. Similarly, you may frequently be disappointed when others do not live up to the rules. If you use “should,” “must,” and “ought” often in your thinking or conversation, you may be setting yourself up for feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment.
- *Labeling and mislabeling*: This is a mental and verbal way of doing the above types of thinking. Instead of seeing a person or a behavior or an event as it is, you give it a label that allows you to dismiss or degrade it, to reinforce your negative outlook or interpretation. For example, if a person makes a mistake, you may label that person as “stupid.”

What are the three types of cognitive distortion that you have used most often?

My Typical Distorted Thinking

When we have thoughts about a situation, we usually have feelings about it, too. Thoughts and feelings both affect our behaviors. The table shows some examples.

Situation <i>What happened?</i>	Thoughts <i>What did you think?</i>	Feelings <i>How did you feel?</i>	Behavior <i>What did you do?</i>
A relationship ended.	No one will ever love me again. <i>(All-or-nothing thinking)</i>	Sad, lonely	Isolated myself so I didn't meet anyone new.
I started drinking or using again.	I will never be sober. <i>(Magnifying)</i>	Guilty, discouraged	Kept drinking or using.
My boss told me to do something a certain way.	He thinks he knows it all. <i>(Jumping to conclusions)</i>	Angry and frustrated with myself	I didn't listen to him.
	He thinks I am stupid. <i>(Mind reading)</i>	Threatened	Started to cry.
	He's an overcontrolling jerk. <i>(Labeling and mislabeling)</i>	Angry with the boss, resentful	Did it my way.

In the empty boxes, write some typical situations and behaviors in your own life. Fill in all the columns for each of the examples you provide. These can be situations in prison or out of prison.

Situation <i>What happened?</i>	Thoughts <i>What did you think?</i>	Feelings <i>How did you feel?</i>	Behavior <i>What did you do?</i>

Feelings Inside and Outside

Sometimes we don't show on the outside how we are feeling on the inside. For example, you may smile at others when you are feeling sad or scared. Or you may act angry when you are actually feeling vulnerable or scared. Getting your outside self to match your inside self is one way to feel more whole.

Can you recall a time when you felt one way inside but looked different to those around you? Draw or write about your experience below.

Feelings inside:



What you show others:

The DVD of *What I Want My Words To Do To You*

This session includes a film called *What I Want My Words to Do to You*, featuring the main character, Keila. If you have watched it in your group or have access to it, please complete the following section. If not, please skip these questions until you can watch the film. Then continue and complete the questions in “Understanding Me” and note the Between-Sessions Activities to be completed before the next session.

This film was made at the Bedford Hills Prison in the State of New York. A famous writer named Eve Ensler (now called “V”), who wrote the play called *The Vagina Monologues*, ran a writing group for women at Bedford. This is an older video but it has a lot to share. Your group will watch parts of the film in various sessions. By the time you complete this program, you will have seen the entire film.

Understanding Keila

In the session, the group used some of the ideas about the inner and outer selves, and how thoughts and feelings can affect behavior, and applied them to Keila’s situation. What are your answers to the following questions?

1. What were Keila’s thoughts that day?
2. What was she feeling?
3. What did she do?

We know that values and beliefs, as well as thoughts and feelings, create the inner self. Do we know any more about these in Keila's life?

Keila experienced victimization; she was not responsible for being raped or threatened. We do not want to blame her for this victimization in any way. As we talk about violence and victimization, we have to be aware of how we can be both victimized and how we act toward others. We also want to recognize when and how our choices may be limited or constrained, in addition to thinking about our decisions.

1. Over the three days between the attack and her meeting him, how could she have acted differently? What influenced her decisions? What limited her options?
2. Keila states in the video: "If I had just run, then none of this would have happened." She shared that she thinks about this daily. Do you agree with her? What else could have changed her trajectory?

5. What might have been different if she had had a “container” for her feelings? What other supports do you wish she had?

Understanding Me

As you think about the event that brought you here, you will realize that your ways of thinking, your assumptions, your values, and your feelings all influenced your behavior. Please take a few moments to think about the crime that brought you into the criminal justice system and then begin to fill in the answers.

1. What were your thoughts that day?

2. What were some of your beliefs?

3. What were you feeling?

4. What were your actions?

5. How could you have acted differently?

Between-Sessions Activities

1. As you go through the week, focus your awareness on your thinking to see if any of the cognitive distortions or “twisted thinking” we have discussed occur for you. Keep a record of them here. Try to find one, two, or three occurrences to add to the examples you gave on page 35. Record what you think and how you feel.
2. Think about ways in which you might use the Creating a Container activity.
3. Finish writing the information about your feelings, beliefs, and actions on pages 40 and 41.
4. What is one thing you will leave this session with? What have you learned or realized?