
SESSION ONE

Thinking Our Thoughts

Goals

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

Time

2 hours

Materials Needed

- Name tags
- A music player and relaxing music
- Participant workbooks and pencils
- A newsprint flip-chart pad, an easel, and felt-tipped pens
- Masking tape
- A small squeeze bottle of blue or green food coloring and a clear glass containing water
- A DVD player, monitor, and the *What I Want My Words To Do To You* DVD
- Facial tissues

Session Overview

- Quiet Time
- Welcome

- Self-Soothing Activity: Creating a Container
- Review of Group Agreements
- Thinking About the Last Session
- Review of the Between-Sessions Activity
- Session Goals
- Information To Share: The Spirals of Violence and Nonviolence
- Activity: Thinking, Feeling, and Substance Use
- Discussion: Thinking, Feeling, and Substance Use
- Information To Share: Automatic Thoughts
- Information To Share: Cognitive Distortion
- Activity: My Typical Distorted Thinking
- Activity: Feelings Inside and Outside
- Activity: *What I Want My Words To Do To You* DVD
- Activity: Understanding Keila and Understanding Me
- Thinking About This Session
- Between-Sessions Activities
- Self-Soothing Activity: Palms Down, Palms Up
- Closing

Background Information for the Facilitator

To prepare for the introduction of the “Session Goals”: Before the session, write the heading “Goals of Session One” at the top of a piece of flip-chart paper.

To prepare for the “Thinking, Feeling, and Substance Use” activity: You may need to get the small squeeze bottle of blue or green food coloring, and possibly the clear glass containing water, from the facility’s or agency’s kitchen or obtain permission ahead of time to bring either into the facility.

FACILITATOR’S NOTES

DIALOGUE

Quiet Time

(1–2 minutes)

Let’s just sit silently for a minute or so to let ourselves unwind, relax, and turn our attention to where we are now.

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Begin the session by playing soft music.

Read the following slowly.

DIALOGUE

Welcome

(1 minute)

Welcome to Session One of the *Beyond Violence+* program. In this session and the five after it, the topic we will explore is the self. We will be focusing on ourselves as individuals and on issues that create the risk for violence in our lives. This first session is called "Thinking Our Thoughts."

Self-Soothing Activity: Creating a Container

(2 minutes)

In each of our sessions, we will open and close with a self-soothing or calming activity that will help us to deal with our thoughts and feelings. Today we'll start with the "Creating a Container" activity that you learned in our Orientation Session. You had a chance to practice it during your between-sessions activity, and we will practice it again as we start each of the sessions in this part of the program. The more we practice these activities, the easier it is to use them when we are feeling overwhelmed.

1. Please close your eyes or lower your eyelids. Take a deep breath and let it out.

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Post the list of Group Agreements from the Orientation Session.

DIALOGUE

2. Imagine a container. You may choose the one you drew in your workbook or you may change it. Make sure that it has a lid.
3. Now imagine depositing any of your negative or difficult thoughts and feelings into the container. Place all of them in the container, knowing that it's just for a brief period of time. Put the lid on.
4. You can retrieve these items any time you want or need to deal with them. For now, however, you can focus on other things.
5. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes.

Remember that this technique is a good one to use when you are feeling anxious, stressed, or overwhelmed, and you need to focus on something else. To close each session in this topic area, we will practice another soothing or calming activity, the "Palms Down, Palms Up" one that we did at the end of our Orientation Session.

Review of Group Agreements

(2–3 minutes)

On page 6 in the workbook, some of you may have added suggestions or comments to our list of Group Agreements.

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Allow time for the participants to open their workbooks.

If anything significant arises, write it on the flip-chart paper.

Encourage several group members to share.

Encourage several group members to share.

Allow time for the participants to do this.

DIALOGUE

Has anyone thought of anything that is missing? Is there anything confusing that needs to be discussed or clarified?

Thinking About the Last Session

(5–10 minutes)

Who will share any thoughts or insights you had as a result of the Orientation Session?

What were your reactions to hearing the statistics on violence?

What other feelings did the Orientation Session arouse?

Review of the Between-Sessions Activity

(5–10 minutes)

Please open your workbooks to page 24.

Please share what you picked for your containers and the pictures you drew of them.

Now I would like to hear about your experiences in using the Creating a

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Thank any participants who share.

Show the piece of flip-chart paper headed "Goals of Session One," give the volunteer a felt-tipped pen, and read the goals slowly and clearly while the volunteer writes them on the paper (or copy them from page 29 of the workbook).

Thank the volunteer.

DIALOGUE

Container activity in the past week.
Who would like to describe this experience?

Session Goals

(1–2 minutes)

Each session in this program will have specific goals. Overall, we are going to be exploring four different levels of our lives, starting with the individual self. In doing this work, you have an opportunity to get to know yourselves better. In this session, we will examine how our individual thoughts and feelings influence our behaviors.

May I have a volunteer to write our session goals on the flip chart?

The goals of this session are:

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

Information To Share: The Spirals of Violence and Nonviolence

(3–5 minutes)

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

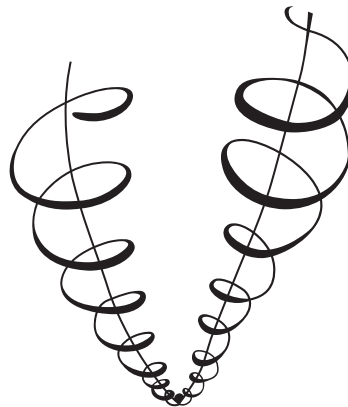
Allow time for the participants to open their workbooks.

DIALOGUE

At the individual level, people's personal histories and biological factors influence how they behave and their risks of becoming victims or perpetrators of violence. Among these factors are being abused in childhood or adulthood, mental health issues, alcohol and substance misuse, and a history of behaving aggressively (*World Health Organization, 2023*).

Everybody has an inner self and an outer self. Our inner selves consist of our thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs. Our outer selves consist of our behaviors and relationships. Our inner selves and our outer selves are both affected by the violence in our lives. Now let's look at one way to think about the process of violence and the process of nonviolence. Please turn to page 30 of the workbook. You will see a picture of two spirals.

(Transformation)



Violence
(Constriction)

Nonviolence
(Expansion)

DIALOGUE

The 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, and as you organize your life around it, it constricts and limits your life. This is true for both victims and victimizers. For victims, it may mean being shut off from contact with family members and friends, being shut off from social services, and feeling isolated and alone. A victim may be afraid to go places for fear of further harm. A victim also may feel afraid to go to places and people who can help.

For victimizers, it may mean trying to keep the violence a secret, associating only with other violent people, and having to hide from law enforcement agencies. Anger and violence are the only reactions that some perpetrators know. For both the victim and victimizer, the inner self—their thoughts and feelings—becomes more and more limited and hidden, and the outer self—their behavior and relationships—becomes more isolated.

The purpose of this program is to help you to stop the downward spiral. Look at the upward spiral on the right. 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. Every major life experience stays with us all

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

DIALOGUE

our lives. However, in the upward spiral, there is increasing room for growth and healing and many other life experiences.

As we stop participating in the use of force or aggressive or violent behavior and we begin to heal from the violence we have experienced, this creates the possibility of experiencing profound change in our lives. This change can happen when we learn new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving and when we learn how to create healthier relationships with others.

The goal is to become whole and to have our inner selves—our thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs—connected to our outer selves in terms of our behaviors and relationships. When the inner and outer selves are connected and congruent—meaning that they match or complement each other—there can be truth and integrity in our lives. That is why it is so important that we become self-aware: so that we can become whole people with integrity. Integrity is connection and congruence between the inner and outer selves. The inner mirrors the outer and vice versa. In a criminal justice setting, it can be very difficult to have the outer self and the inner self connected. Just think about how much you hide from others while you are in this facility [or program].

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

1. Give the volunteer a small, clear glass of water and a squeeze bottle of blue or green food coloring.
2. Say that the volunteer's responsibility is to drop droplets of food coloring into the water but to make sure that the food coloring doesn't change the color of the water.

DIALOGUE

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 a person *decides* to make changes in her or their life. This creates the beginning of the upward spiral. This is the process of transformation: when a person changes her or their life and is able to say, "Who I am today is not who I was!"

Activity: Thinking, Feeling, and Substance Use

(5 minutes)

Part of the inner self is one's thoughts and feelings. In order to understand ourselves, it's important to understand how and why we think and feel the way we do. The use of alcohol and other drugs affects our thoughts and feelings. This is why they are called "mood-altering" substances. Alcohol and other drugs actually affect our minds. Let's try an experiment.

I need a volunteer from the group.
Who will be this brave person?

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

3. If the group is laughing, let the members know that the activity is silly because it is impossible.
4. Thank the volunteer for being willing to step up and help.

If time allows, you can have the group members first share their thoughts and experiences within duos (pairs) or trios and then share with the total group. This will require an additional 5 to 7 minutes.

DIALOGUE

Why couldn't _____ [*name of volunteer*] keep the food coloring from influencing the water? Because it's a chemical reaction, the same thing that happens to your brain when you use alcohol and other drugs. The effects are physical as well as psychological, and you can't escape the effects. Once a drug is in your system, your brain is at the mercy of the drug, and it "colors" how your brain works, just like the food coloring changes the water. Alcohol and other drugs affect how you experience things and how you react to them. They can make your brain think things that aren't true, which affects your feelings. And these affect your decisions and behaviors.

Discussion: Thinking, Feeling, and Substance Use

(5–10 minutes)

What are some of your thoughts about the experiment? How is this like your experiences with alcohol and other drugs? What are some of your experiences?

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Many participants may have automatic thoughts that have been called “criminal thinking” by some researchers in criminology. It is not a term we will use in this program, as it does not accurately reflect the effects of systemic issues that incarcerated women face.

DIALOGUE

Information To Share: Automatic Thoughts

(5 minutes)

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 are spontaneous; they just pop into our minds. We are so used to them that we don't even notice what is happening. Our automatic thoughts affect our attitudes and beliefs and the basic assumptions we make about people and the world around us. No matter how irrational they are,

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

DIALOGUE

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. But many people don't question or challenge them. They don't examine them to see if they are really 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. This is something we will work on in our session today and in future sessions.

Information To Share: Cognitive Distortion

(5–8 minutes)

When your mind convinces you of something that isn't really true, it is called a "cognitive distortion." The word *cognitive* relates to something you see or hear about or experience and

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Allow time for the participants to do this.

Options:

1. You may want to write the headings in the right column on a piece of flip-chart paper as you discuss them.
2. Depending on the reading skills of the participants in the group, you may want to ask them to take turns reading the items on the list aloud.

DIALOGUE

the judgments you assign to it. Then you think that you *know* that something is “good” or “bad” or “stupid,” but, in reality, that is only your interpretation of it. Such distortions usually are used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions. Cognitive distortions also are called “thinking errors,” “negative self-talk,” “twisted thinking,” and “distorted information processing.”

Please turn to page 32 in the workbook.

On pages 32 and 33 is a list of some of the ways that people think that cause difficulties for themselves and others (Beck, 2019; Wright, Brown, Thase, & Ramirez Basco, 2017).

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 also may interpret events in this way and say things like, “Why does this stuff always happen to me?”

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

DIALOGUE

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 some people don't like you or think that they are better than you without getting to know them or checking your assumptions. When you interpret someone's facial expressions or nonverbal communication with no other input, you are projecting what is in your mind, not what is in the other person's.

DIALOGUE

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 actually 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 in a negative way. If you are feeling “up,” you may see things through “rose-colored glasses.” In short, “I feel it; therefore, it must be true.”

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Allow time for the participants to look at this.

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.

DIALOGUE

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 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, in order to reinforce your negative outlook or interpretation. For example, if a person makes a mistake, you may label that person as "stupid."

Our automatic thoughts are often the distortions we just talked about. Let's look at an example taken from the first row in the "My Typical Distorted Thinking" chart on page 34 in the workbook.

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Option: You may also have the group members then share with the whole group. This will take an additional 5 to 7 minutes.

Participants who have been incarcerated for a very long time probably will focus on prison experiences only, as that has been their reality.

DIALOGUE

In an example like this, a relationship that was important to you ends. You decide that no one will ever love you again, so you isolate yourself. You now feel very sad and lonely and perhaps use alcohol to numb the feeling of loneliness. In this example, we can see that your cognitive distortion has affected your behavior and made your problem even worse.

Now tell the person next to you on your right the three faulty distortions you think you use most often.

When we have thoughts about a situation, we usually have feelings about it, too. Thoughts and feelings both affect our behaviors.

Now look at page 35 of the workbook.

In the empty boxes, write in some typical situations and behaviors in your own life. Fill in the feeling column for each of the examples you provide. These can be situations in a prison or another correctional setting or in the community.

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

DIALOGUE

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>

Activity: Feelings Inside and Outside (10 minutes)

Sometimes we don't show on the outside how we are feeling on the inside. We may smile at others when we really feel sad or scared. Or we may act angry when we are actually feeling vulnerable or scared. Getting our outside selves to match our inside selves is one way to feel more congruent and whole.

Can any of you recall a time when you felt one way inside but looked different to those around you? Does this happen more inside a prison or correctional setting? If so, why do you think it happens more here than in your home or community? Draw or write about your experiences on page 36 of your workbooks.

When the group members have completed the writing or drawing activity, ask if anyone would like to share. Use the list on the right to guide the discussion.

- Why did you feel that you needed to hide your true feelings?
- Describe how it felt.
- Describe a person or place that makes you feel safe enough to share your true feelings.

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Show the Introduction from the
What I Want My Words To Do To You DVD.

Show Exercise 1 from the DVD.

DIALOGUE

**Activity: *What I Want My Words
To Do To You* DVD**
(5 minutes)

Now we are going to watch two scenes from a film made at the Bedford Hills Prison in the state of New York. A famous writer named Eve Ensler (who now goes by "V"), and who wrote a play called *The Vagina Monologues*, ran a writing group for women at Bedford. This is an older video, but I think you will find that it is still relevant and it offers a rare opportunity to hear women talk directly about their convictions for violent offenses. We will watch parts of this film in various sessions. By the time you complete this program, you will have seen the entire film. The first part is an introduction. Then we will see a brief clip from the writing group, with one of the women reading a writing exercise that she has done in the group.

We are going to watch a segment of the film in which one of the women, Keila, describes the day that she shot a person she thought was a "friend" and a life was lost. As you watch this segment, please try to notice what Keila is thinking and feeling.

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Allow time for the participants to do this.

Debrief the video with concepts regarding the self. For example, use the focus questions on the right.

DIALOGUE

Activity: Understanding Keila and Understanding Me

(20 minutes)

Please open your workbooks to page 37.

There are questions we can use as we discuss what we saw and heard in the DVD.

Let's use some of the concepts we have been learning about the inner and the outer selves, as well as how thoughts and feelings can affect behavior, and let's see how these apply to Keila. There is a lot we don't know about Keila and her situation, so we will have to make some guesses or assumptions based on what we have heard from her.

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? Please turn to page 38 in the workbook.

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 ran, 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?

Now look at page 39.

3. Keila shot her friend because her safety was gravely threatened. This is considered an act of self-defense. However, one factor that influenced Keila's case is that she took a gun with her to see her friend and, therefore, she was questioned about whether she was engaging in "premeditated murder." What limited Keila's options for behaviors? What influenced her decisions?

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Allow time for the participants to look at this.

DIALOGUE

4. How did her inner self—her thoughts, feelings values, and beliefs—affect her behavior?
5. What might have been different if she had had a “container” for her feelings? What other supports do you wish she had?

As you think about the event or events that brought you here, you will realize that your ways of thinking, your assumptions, your values, and your feelings all influenced your behavior. On pages 40 and 41 of the workbook, you will find questions and spaces to write in.

Please take a few moments to think about the situation or circumstances that brought you here and begin to fill in the answers.

- What were your thoughts that day?
- What were some of your beliefs?
- What were you feeling?
- What were your actions?
- How could you have acted differently?

Please start now. You can finish this between the end of this session and the beginning of the next one if you need more time.

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Participants may need time to refer to the pages in their workbooks.

DIALOGUE

Thinking About This Session

(5–8 minutes)

Would anyone volunteer to share something about a personal experience—perhaps your thoughts that the day that brought you here or maybe a belief or a feeling?

Between-Sessions Activities

(2–3 minutes)

As you go through the week, focus your awareness on your thinking to see if any of the cognitive distortions we have discussed occur for you. You can keep a record of them in your workbook. Try to find one, two, or three occurrences to add to the examples you gave on page 35 of your workbook. Record what you think and how you feel.

Second, think about ways in which you might use the container activity.

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

Read the instructions slowly.

DIALOGUE

Finally, please finish writing the information about your actions on pages 40 and 41 of the workbook.

Self-Soothing Activity: Palms Down, Palms Up

(1 minute)

Now let's do the Palms Down, Palms Up activity.

1. Sit comfortably with your back straight. Close your eyes or lower your eyelids and focus on your breathing.
2. Take a slow, deep breath while counting to 4. Then exhale slowly, counting to 4. Do this 4 more times until your breathing is slow and relaxed.
3. Keep breathing slowly and evenly. Hold your hands gently in front of you and imagine them holding all the negative or upsetting thoughts and feelings you've had today.
4. Now turn your palms down. Imagine yourself emptying your hands of all the negative or upsetting things you've been carrying today. Let go of them.
5. Keep breathing slowly. Now, turn your palms up. Your palms are up and open to receive positive energy

FACILITATOR'S NOTES

After the participants have shared, tell them that there is space on page 42 of the workbook for them to write this down. Allow time for the participants look at the page in their workbooks.

DIALOGUE

and positive thoughts and feelings. Your palms are open to receive support and help.

Any time when you need to let go of something negative and receive the positive, you can take a few minutes to do this activity.

Closing

(5 minutes)

I'd like each of you to share what you are taking with you from this session. What is one thing you will leave this group with: perhaps something you have learned or realized?

Thank you for all your hard work today. We certainly have covered a lot of topics in this session, and I know that we all have a lot to think about. Please try to do the Between-Sessions Activities while all this is still fresh in your minds. I hope that this session has been enlightening for you, and I look forward to seeing you next time.

References

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